

Shinta Fuji

Illustrated by
Susumu Kuroi



APPARENTLY,
DISILLUSIONED
ADVENTURERS WILL
SAVE THE WORLD

The Southern Saint



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3





**"TIME FOR
ROUND
THREE."**

The sterling knight's mystical, sonorous voice reverberated in the abandoned facility. They snapped their fingers, and the floating Sword of Bonds shone bright, illuminating the area. The light enveloped Tiana and Karan, healing their injuries completely.

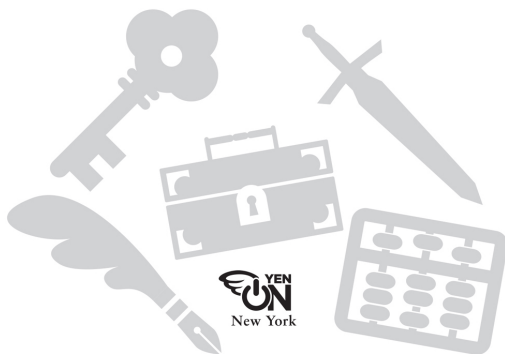
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ADVENTURERS *WILL*
SAVE THE WORLD

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Shinta Fuji

Cover art by *Susumu Kuroi*
Translation by *Luke Hutton*

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NINGENFUSHIN NO BOKENSHATACHI GA SEKAI WO SUKUYODESU
Vol. 3 ~MINAMI NO SEIJIN HEN~

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A Collection Job



The brawny creature fought vigorously. Well, calling it brawny wasn't quite right when it was neither a man nor a beast, but a tree. It had arms and legs like a human, yet its body was made of actual cork rather than muscle. Bark protected it like armor, and leaves grew thickly from its head like hair.

From having absorbed the light, water, and mana rich within the labyrinth, multiple parts of its body swelled tremendously to resemble human muscle. It clenched its fists, causing the parts of its arms that equated to a human's biceps and forearms to bulge beautifully and threateningly, and it thrust its right arm forward for a straight punch.

"RAAAAAAAH!"

The monster was called the triffid champion, and it ruled the labyrinth known as Martial Triffid Forest. This labyrinth produced a great number of monsters called triffids. Strangely enough, they all demonstrated an odd fixation on improving their strength and mastering all forms of hand-to-hand combat. The monster that rose to the top of their struggle was crowned the triffid champion.

Now that boss was facing a new group of challengers. This time, its opponents were not fellow triffids. One of them—a dragonian, a humanoid race—blocked its punch.

"Phew... I can handle it," the red-haired female dragonian warrior said, using her greatsword as a shield to block its attack head-on. The tremendous impact of the blow pushed her heels deep into the ground, but she held her stance.

The triffid champion was two heads taller than she was, as well as wider and heavier. Its strength should have been superior, but despite that, the dragonian had completely stopped its deadly blow.

"Fortify appears to be working," said a tall priestly man hanging

back behind the warrior. He had cast a spell to increase her strength, enabling her to withstand the triffid champion's punch.

"Is that all you've got?"

The fire in the dragonian's eyes caused the monster to falter momentarily, but it clenched its fists again as if determined not to lose. Her magical enhancement did nothing to quell its desire to pummel her. The boss tried again with its left fist, and when the dragonian blocked that punch with her sword, it followed quickly with its right fist. Each blow to the greatsword's blade sounded like a deafening strike against a gong.

"Karan! Zem! I'm ready!" another girl called out in between the triffid champion's cacophonous blows. The warrior heard her and quickly retreated.

The monster punched air as if to say "Where do you think you're going? This match is between us!" and when its muscles—or rather, cork—relaxed after its swing, multiple icicles stabbed its body.

"GAAAAAAA?!"

"Does this thing have a throat? Vocalization should be impossible without one," muttered the girl who fired the icicles. She was a mage wearing a large hat.

"The voice is apparently produced by vibrations in its tree hollows. I can't tell you how that works, though... Take that!" A black-haired young man answered as he rushed forward.

His target was the triffid champion, of course. The monster, with icicles still piercing its body, waved its thick arms to ward off further attacks, but the young man slipped nimbly through them and approached close enough for their breath to mingle had his opponent been human. They could each sense the other's malice.

It was then that the triffid champion noticed something peculiar. The young man wasn't holding a weapon—he was holding a bladeless sword handle.

"Good, good! It feels nice to be used as a sword every now and again!"

An androgynous voice spoke, accompanied by a strange rumbling sound. A shining white blade then burst from the empty sword handle.

"RAAAAAAAAH!"

By the time the triffid champion realized how dangerous the sword was, it had already been cleaved in two.

"Well done, Nick."

Then something strange happened—the sword the young man was holding glowed with a faint light and transformed into a human. It took the form of an androgynous silver-haired child with a mysterious air about them. The weapon was a holy sword called the Sword of Bonds, and when in human form, he assumed the name "Bond." He was a relic from the ancient civilization, and possessed a human body and consciousness and the ability to combine the strength of comrades

to produce an immense amount of power.

"I need to perform my role as a member of our vanguard, too... But Bond, fight in human form next time," the sword's wielder ordered.

"Why?!"

"The more we use you, the more likely we are to be found out. Especially with that paladin rumor going around. I made an exception this time 'cause I don't wanna be out of practice should we ever need you."

The black-haired young man who wielded the Sword of Bonds was Nick. He was the leader of an adventurer's party called the Survivors that operated in Labyrinth City. His party members were a dragonian warrior named Karan, a mage named Tiana, and a healer and former priest called Zem.

On their way back to Labyrinth City after their successful venture into Martial Triffid Forest, the Survivors grew hungry and decided to take a break by the Teran River. They chose a spot not far from the labyrinth called Gooley Waterworks.

"Should we go ahead and have lunch?" Nick asked.

"Yeah!" Karan responded with an excited nod, and they headed for the riverside. It was an ideal spot for a break during an adventure, as they were able to replenish their flasks with clean drinking water.

"Let's see, I've got wild grass, onions, duck, and dried tomatoes... Guess I'll make Labyrinth Chicken," Nick muttered as he spread out his ingredients by the riverside.

"That is clearly not chicken," Bond said with exasperation, but Nick ignored him and continued the preparations.

"It'll work. Literally anything can be Labyrinth Chicken as long as you have tomatoes and meat. Doesn't matter if the meat is pigeon, duck, or whatever else."

"How crude."

"That's fine with me as long as it tastes good," Karan said cheerfully. She made a pile of stones next to Nick and tossed sticks onto it to make a simple makeshift stove and lit it with her breath.

"I particularly enjoyed this adventure, Nick," Zem said.

"I can tell. You seem happy," Nick responded.

"Noncombative tasks like picking herbs or mining suit me better than fighting monsters."

Nick's eyes wandered to Zem's back. In addition to his usual black cassock and mace, he was wearing a large basket on his back. The basket contained a great variety of medicinal herbs they had picked in Martial Triffid Forest.

"That's a big help for us. A rich variety of high-quality herbs grow

in labyrinths, but knowing what to pick is difficult without the expertise. Whether that labyrinth is a treasure trove or just a place to duke it out with some trees depends entirely on the party.”

“I’m happy to help. I have plenty of experience picking herbs from my past job.”

Martial Triffid Forest was located in the expansive woodlands to the north of Labyrinth City. It was recommended for intermediate adventurers. Triffids, led by the triffid champion Nick had just killed, were the only monsters that appeared there. They didn’t use magic and favored hand-to-hand combat, but they were all capable fighters. Their bodies were tough because they were essentially living trees, which provided them a strong defense against physical attacks. They were even resistant to fire spells. The only way to defeat them was to penetrate their bodies with pure strength.

The labyrinth was a clear step up in difficulty from Goblin Forest and Gooley Waterworks. Fortunately, the rewards matched the difficulty—an abundance of herbs grew in the forest and could be sold for high prices at the Adventurers Guild.

“A part of me regrets that I am not in a party that specializes in collection jobs, though. I feel like I could make much more money that way,” Zem continued.

“Those do exist, but they’re pretty rare,” Nick responded.

“Why is that?” Zem asked, tilting his head. Tiana answered him.

“Only learned people like doctors and scholars can properly appraise herbs. Not many of them are willing to venture into labyrinths themselves,” she said.

“Oh, I see.”

“You should try writing a thesis, Zem. There’s a demand for research on labyrinth herbs and grasses,” Tiana suggested.

“Would anyone listen to the words of an excommunicated priest?” Zem responded self-deprecatingly. Tiana gave a bold smile.

“No magic school or research institution would care about your background. They don’t typically get along with sanctuaries. One time, an excommunicated priest joined a lab and found a treatment for a disease. It was very well received, but the sanctuary that banished him flipped out when they caught wind of it. Things like that tend to happen.”

“Huh, I had no idea...”

“I’ll help you out if you ever decide to write one. Educated people who can conduct fieldwork in labyrinths are valuable. You could end up getting scouted by some research institution.”

“Thank you, but I’ll pass on that. It seems less fun than working as an adventurer.”

“That’s disappointing,” Tiana said, not sounding disappointed in

the least. She had probably expected him to say that.

"I know you can make money picking herbs, but I didn't see anything that looked tasty. There weren't any edible fruits or plants, either. I'm starving," Karan said. She seemed considerably less satisfied with this adventure than Zem. She had been expecting to find something consumable and was disappointed to have come up with nothing.

"There's a labyrinth nearby suited for gourmets, but we can't enter it at our current rank... It's unlikely we'd be able to reach it anyway," Nick said.

"There is?!" Karan exclaimed.

"The woodlands are divided into blocks consisting of ordinary forests and ones that function as labyrinths. Martial Triffid Forest and Goblin Forest are two of those labyrinths, and there are plenty of others as well. There's one called Devil's Paradise somewhere in the region."

"Somewhere? Do you not know where it is?"

"It's surrounded by a special barrier that normally hides it from view. But once every few decades, a part of the barrier opens, allowing entry. The peaches found there are called platinum peaches, and one of them sold for twenty million dina at an auction, the highest price ever for a food item."

Karan gulped. "Wh-what are these peaches like?"

"Apparently, one bite will reduce you to tears or move you so deeply that you'll faint. Hard to know what to believe with that kind of praise. The actual taste supposedly combines the sweetness of peaches with the freshness of melons."

"Would anyone really eat one, though? You might as well throw twenty million dina down the drain," Tiana said with a strained laugh. Nick responded with a wry smile.

"Most of the people who take on Devil's Paradise are actually gourmets rather than explorers looking to get rich quick. The peaches taste their best when ripe and freshly picked...so I've heard. Story goes, only one of the three peaches picked last time was put up for auction."

"Th-they ate forty million dina's worth of peaches on the spot?! That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard! Who would do that?!"

Tiana was shocked. Karan and Zem were wide-eyed as well.

"It was Solo Diner Fifs," Nick answered.

"He's insane...," Tiana muttered, sounding almost angry.

"Not even Fifs would hog forty million dina's worth of peaches to himself, though. He entered the labyrinth with a temporary party."

"Wow, that's unusual," Karan said with interest.

"Yeah, it is. The party was called the Grand Chefs. It primarily

focused on exploration and collecting, and every member was a total weirdo. There was Head Chef Jake, Sommelier Ada, and—”

“Did you just say ‘Ada’?” Zem interrupted, appearing surprised to hear the name.

“What, do you know her?”

“It may be a different person, but there is a woman who works as a bouncer at a hostess club I occasionally visit. She professes to be a former advanced adventurer. She is an...unruly drunk, to say the least.”

“Has she given you trouble before?”

“Yes, she has. She often pesters customers for drinks and gets in fights, despite being a bouncer. That’s why I doubt it is the same person...”

“I don’t know about that. It’s not rare for adventurers to go astray after making too much money at once. It might actually be her.”

“It is a cruel world.”

Nick and Zem shared somber expressions.

“I for one couldn’t care less about whatever money will do to me. I’ll worry about that after I become an advanced adventurer rich enough to waste tens of millions of dina without a second thought,” Tiana interrupted bluntly.

“Yeah! I want to eat one of those peaches,” Karan said. Nick chuckled in response to their frankness.

“It may not be as special as one of those platinum peaches, but I found a good mushroom,” Zem announced with an intrepid smile. He produced a strange mushroom from his knapsack.

“What is that thing?” Nick asked, staring at it. It was quite ugly. The five protuberances growing from the tip of the stem made it look like a human hand.

“This is a glory mushroom. They are rare and only grow in forest labyrinths, and restore mana when eaten. I found this one earlier,” Zem explained.

“R-really?!” Karan shouted.

“A glory mushroom?!” Tiana repeated.

The girls bent forward excitedly and stared at the mushroom.

“You two know what that weird thing is?” Nick asked.

“Yeah. They’re really expensive. I think one this big would sell for fifty thousand dina,” Karan answered.

“This is the kind of food you’d see at an imperial palace banquet. They really do restore mana, too...,” Tiana added.

“R-really? It looks disgusting,” Nick commented, looking at the mushroom with uncertainty.

“They’re delicious, though,” Karan assured him.

“Just chop it into small pieces. Nobody eats them like that,” Tiana

said.

"I'll take your word for it... Are you okay with not selling it, though?" Nick asked, looking at his party members in turn. Tiana seemed to hesitate for a moment.

"W-well, twenty-million-dina peaches would be one thing, but if this is just worth fifty thousand... Let's eat it. I've always wanted to try one," Tiana answered.

"You can be so boorish, Nick," Bond cackled. Nick ignored him and grabbed his knife.

"Can I cut this up and boil it like a normal mushroom?" he asked.

"It's not poisonous. You just have to clean it," Karan answered.

Nick grabbed the mushroom and cut it up, tossing bite-sized pieces into the pot, and fried the wild grasses and dried tomatoes while he was at it. The sweet fragrance of the mushroom filled their camp. Once everything was sufficiently cooked, he poured water in the pot to simmer the food. He then tasted it while adding salt and spices to get it just right.

"Is the fire hot enough?" Karan asked.

"Yeah, it's fine. You don't mind using your breath for cooking, do you?" Nick said.

"Huh? Would some people be against that?"

"Some believe you shouldn't debase magic by using it on an everyday activity like cooking."

"But it's so convenient."

They chatted to pass the time, and Nick filled everyone's plates once the food was ready.

"Let's eat. We don't have any alcohol, so we'll have to do without a toast," he said.

They each said their own customary phrase before digging in. The custom of clinking glasses together before drinking at dinner was universal, but the words one said before eating an ordinary meal differed slightly by region.

"Thank you for this meal," Karan said, putting her hands together and bobbing her head. This was a practice particular to the dragonians. It differed from the customs around Labyrinth City, of which there were a variety, depending on the god being worshipped, but many imitated the dragonians' practice of bowing one's head. It was easy to understand as a gesture of gratitude or apology.

"I give thanks for the blessings of heaven and earth," Zem said, drawing a circle in the air with his index and middle fingers. The motion came from the teachings of Medora, the god of providence, in which you should never forget that you are a part of the world's never-ending cycle.

"Grant us joy and harmony at this table," Tiana said, reciting the

phrase used by royalty and nobility. Noble banquets often had people from a variety of religious sects and nationalities, so great importance was placed on harmony.

“Year 934 of the King’s Calendar. Month five, day twelve. We are eating lunch by the Teran River. The meal consists of Labyrinth Chicken, bread...” Bond didn’t have any special phrase, but he had a habit of recording the date and contents of each meal into his internal knowledge orb. Nick once asked him why he did that, and Bond offered no further explanation than “Because I always have.”

Nick didn’t have a particular habit, but he found himself imitating Karan and putting his hands together. It felt the most fitting to him.

“Wow, this tastes even better than usual!” Tiana exclaimed.

“The mushroom helped make the stock better. I see why it’s considered a luxury,” Nick responded.

“Yeah. It’s rare to find glory mushrooms on the market,” Karan said.

“The main reason they’re so expensive is because they’re more effective than your average mana recovery medicine,” Tiana said between delighted sips of the soup.

“Interesting. Will I be able to use magic after eating this?” Nick asked.

“No mushroom is suddenly gonna give you magical powers. But everyone has *some* amount of mana, however small, so there is at least a slight chance. You don’t have any trouble activating magic items, at least.”

“Huh.”

“Let’s perform a little test after we finish eating.”

Once everyone was finished, Tiana brought out a small magic item called an igniter, which was used to cast the spell Ignite. She used it regularly to light her pipe.

“Is this the igniter you were gifted after the casino incident?” Nick asked.

“No. This is one I modified for personal use. There’s no limiter, so the flame will keep getting stronger the more mana you pour into it. We’ll be able to tell by the flame if you have more or less than the average person. Go ahead and pour some mana into it.”

“How do I do that?”

“Relax, focus on your navel, and take deep breaths. Recall how you feel when you do your sword or martial arts training.”

“This feels surprisingly spiritual...”

“If you still have trouble summoning mana, work up a light sweat and sit cross-legged— Huh?” Tiana gasped.

A flame that was larger than average formed at the tip of the igniter. It wasn’t the size of a flame seen on a torch, but it was about

as hot as a lamp. The whole party stared in surprise, but Nick was the most shocked of them all.

"I can't believe this... I thought I couldn't use magic," he said elatedly, but his joy was a little premature. It soon became clear that while he possessed more mana than people who couldn't use magic at all, he didn't have enough to learn any practical spells. Tiana's effort to teach him some beginner spells proved almost entirely fruitless.

"Seems like the only one I can use is Magic Sense," Nick muttered, looking at his palms. Tiana nodded.

"It's a basic spell you need to master before you can learn Magic Search. It allows you to detect the presence and amount of mana in things you touch. But unfortunately, you don't have enough mana to train and acquire Magic Search," Tiana explained.

"That's fine with me. I actually think this'll be pretty useful. I do wish I could've learned Zem's strengthening spells, though..." Nick said.

"I doubt that would be possible," Tiana replied, shaking her head regretfully.

"...Actually, you may be able to use some of the weaker strengthening spells. I will look into it," Zem interjected, surprising them both.

"Really?" Nick asked.

"Yes. I have heard that spells used to strengthen oneself consume significantly less mana than those meant to help others. They are used by some martial artists."

"What? I've never heard..." Nick stopped mid-sentence. When he was in Combat Masters, he would often look at his party members or other senior adventurers and think that their strength far exceeded their physique, or that they were too nimble for their weight. At the time, he had assumed that must have been a result of their mastery of martial arts, but Zem's words made him reconsider. They may have actually been using magic. "Do those really exist?"

"Very little is known about these self-strengthening spells. Unlike the common ones taught at schools and sanctuaries, they are only passed down in secret within schools of martial arts and swordsmanship."

"That means it won't be easy finding someone who can teach me. Martial artists are secretive by nature. My Combat Masters instructor never shut up about not sharing his teachings with outsiders. He treated the party like a martial arts school. He wouldn't even tell people what kinds of techniques he taught unless they had a license."

"Fascinating," Zem replied with interest.

"Anyway, I'm just happy to find out I can use magic, even if it's only one spell," Nick announced.

“Yeah! Zem and Tiana can give you some special training after we get back,” Karan said.

“The idea of Tiana as a teacher terrifies me. I’m exhausted just thinking about it.”

“What makes you say that?” Tiana grinned mischievously. She was clearly going to work him to the bone.

“All right, time to head back.”

Just when Nick and the others were about to get up after their break, another group of adventurers approached the river. The sight of them evoked sympathy in the hearts of the Survivors.

“Geez, nobody ever said we would get this gooey! And that thing was really strong!”

“I *knew* we wouldn’t be able to do it. We can’t just become adventurers. We need a real one to teach us first.”

“Let’s go home after we wash this slime off. I’m pooped.”

They were a young group of novice adventurers covered in slime. “Young” didn’t quite cut it as a description—they were all kids who were so small, they looked as if they were still in elementary school.

“Huh? B-but we haven’t beaten the boss yet! We have to finish our adventure!”

“We can’t do it, okay?! We’re still kids. And you have the most injuries out of all of us, Reina! If you go back into that labyrinth, it might be the end of you!”

“Yeah! The end!”

“Let’s just go home already.”

“I know, but...!”

There were five kids in total. It was clear even from a distance that while one girl wanted to continue, the rest of them had given up. *This is a common sight*, Nick thought. He could guess at what had happened: The girl, who probably admired adventurers, had excitedly convinced her friends to form a party and explore a labyrinth, but their mission had ended in failure. There were many kids in Labyrinth City who thought adventurers were the coolest people in the world, and occasionally some got the wrong idea in their heads and tried to embark on an adventure of their own.

“Oh, there’s people here.”

“H-hello...”

The kids greeted the Survivors awkwardly.

“Hi there,” Nick responded casually. They relaxed and sat down by the riverside. He figured the kids had been afraid the older group of adventurers was going to scold them for their actions.

“Everyone goes through an experience like that, huh?” Tiana whispered to Nick, likely recalling the incident when she was covered

in slime.

“Yeah. This would be the perfect time to convince them to give up.”

“How about you talk to them as a senior adventurer?”

“Hmm...”

Nick gave the arguing kids another look and noticed their situation was different from their own unfortunate experience in Goopy Waterworks—they were all burned and bruised. The injuries were light enough that they wouldn’t have any trouble walking back to Labyrinth City, but they would be in trouble if they ran into a wild dog or monster on the way. They could be approached by some unsavory adults as well. Labyrinth monsters were not the only dangers in life.

“Zem,” Nick said.

“Certainly,” Zem responded, immediately picking up on what Nick was thinking. He approached the kids. “Could you please show me your injuries?”

“Wh-what are you doing?!” a strong-willed boy with a sword shouted, clearly wary of the former priest.

“Let’s see... You have some minor burns. I’m sure they hurt. And you... Did you slip and scrape your knee? Please clean your wound right away. Next... You look quite beaten up. Do you feel any numbness?”

Zem ignored the children’s complaints as he continued to inspect their wounds. He didn’t give them a chance to resist.

“Recovery.”

“Ah...”

Finally, Zem chanted a healing spell. The young party watched in blank amazement as all their injuries disappeared.

“I only performed general first aid, so make sure to treat your injuries when you return to the city. Clean your wounds and take it easy.”

“Wh-what did you do that for?! That was a big help, but... W-we don’t have any money!” shouted a kid who was dressed like a warrior.

“I would not demand money from children. You can pay for the treatment once you achieve a sufficient income.”

“What did you just say?!” the sword user lashed out angrily.

“Just accept his kindness and get your butts home. Some slimes are poisonous. It’s not unheard-of to catch a cold or a bad disease like yellow demon fever from one. You might have died without his treatment,” Nick interjected.

“R-really?!” the boy exclaimed, surprised.

“Really,” Nick affirmed.

That wasn’t technically a lie. Slimes that inhabited marshlands or

caves were occasionally poisonous and carried diseases, but that was only if they ate toxic plants or absorbed minerals or heavy metals into their bodies. They weren't poisonous by nature, nor did they consciously use it when fighting enemies. There was no real danger as long as you didn't let any of the slime's mucus get in your mouth.

None of the slimes in Gooley Waterworks were poisonous. The place had become a labyrinth overrun by monsters, but it was originally a water supply facility built by the ancient civilization. While it had lost that functionality, the water within was still clean and safe to drink, meaning there was no poison for slimes to take in. There were some who treated it as a convenient rest spot rather than as a labyrinth.

Nick was just trying to scare them. Only death would await an adventurer who couldn't handle Gooley Waterworks and was fooled by such a simple lie. He was trying to do them a kindness by getting them to give up adventuring.

"If you're hard-set on becoming an adventurer, go back to the guild and ask an older adventurer for guidance. I suggest you don't, though. Adventuring is not a job you should want to take up unless you have no other choice. You're lucky you didn't meet a worse fate. You could've been monster food or been abducted by the Steppingman."

"Th-the Steppingman isn't real," the sword user refuted with a laugh, but the way his voice shook made it clear he was just acting brave.

"You saying you don't believe me?" Nick asked.

"I—I mean, there's no way he exists. You're just trying to scare us."

Tiana, Zem, and Karan looked completely lost; none of them knew what the Steppingman was. But the fear on the kids' faces made it apparent they knew what he was talking about.

"...He's real."

"Huh?"

"The Steppingman is real!"

One kid—the girl who wanted to continue with their adventure—disagreed with the rest.

"N-no he's not!"

"Not real! Not real!"

"There's no way your mom was actually injured fighting the Steppingman! She proolly just got drunk and fell!"

"N-no, it's true!"

The kids resumed arguing. It wasn't so much an argument as it was the other kids rounding on the girl. She was likely the one who had spearheaded their decision to register as adventurers, and now

that the mission had ended in miserable failure, the other kids were putting the blame on her.

Nick interrupted, fed up with their shouting. "It doesn't matter if he's real or not. It might just be a group of criminals kidnapping and selling children and putting the blame on the Steppingman. Regardless, parties made up entirely of children are easy targets. It wouldn't have been surprising at all if you had never returned from the labyrinth."

His words silenced the kids rounding on the girl, but Nick realized he may have made a small mistake. The girl seemed to be the only one who truly believed what she was saying.

"Yeah! It's probably just some bad grown-ups!"

"Oh, that makes sense."

"Th-then please, teach me how to be an adventurer! You said to ask an older adventurer for help, right?!"

"S-stop, Reina. We've bothered them enough."

"Please!" the girl named Reina begged, ignoring the other kids' attempts to stop her.

"No," Nick responded curtly.

"I'll do anything! I'll run errands, or even work as a servant!"

"I said no. We're leaving."

Nick cut the girl off firmly and started getting ready to go. His party members made resigned expressions and joined him in cleaning up.

"Wh-what about you?! You told us to pay you back once we have the money!" Reina asked, turning to Zem.

"I...did say that, yes. But, please, do not get so close to me," Zem responded, stepping back.

"Huh?" Reina looked puzzled, but then smiled as if coming to a realization. "Father!"

"Wh-what is it?"

"You're such a gentleman! I've heard there are lots of adventurers who treat kids as equals, but you're the first person I've ever seen keep their distance to avoid a misunderstanding!"

"No, that was not my... Well, yes, I *would* rather avoid a misunderstanding!"

"But I trust you! It was really nice of you to heal us without demanding we pay you back!"

Reina quickly closed the distance between them, and gracefully took his trembling hands. She likely meant it as a gesture of gratitude or affection, but...

"Please take me as your apprentice! ...Huh?"

...Zem had gone deathly pale. He looked like he was going to stop breathing any moment.

“Oh, shoot... I didn’t think about that problem of yours, Zem,” Nick said, rushing to lend the man a shoulder before he collapsed. Zem had a unique phobia—you could even call it an illness—that he struggled with on occasion: Cute young girls made him panic.

“Haah... I’ve calmed down now.” Zem sighed, feeling extremely fatigued.

The Survivors had returned to the Fishermen Adventurers Guild and plopped down at an empty table.

“Are you okay, Zem?” Nick asked.

“Yes. My apologies for worrying you all,” he responded, with a slightly haggard expression.

“Must be tough having that much trouble around little girls...”

“I had not gotten that stressed in a while, but seeing such a cute girl with braids brought back painful memories.”

Zem struggled with psychological trauma from an incident in his past when he’d been falsely accused of raping a little girl. He had been stripped of his status as a priest, imprisoned, then finally banished from his town. The sequence of events resulted in a fear of pretty girls around the age of ten. He had no problem with perfunctory interactions, such as providing treatment using healing magic, but if a girl grabbed his hand or touched him in any way, he immediately started to feel sick.

By contrast, he was very fond of adult women. It was thanks to the proprietress of an inn he visited after his banishment that he was able to get back on his feet. He had been a regular patron at night establishments ever since.

“I wouldn’t be surprised if that girl approached us again. I doubt she understood what happened,” Tiana said.

The Survivors had rushed back to the city when it looked like Zem was going to collapse. It all happened too fast to explain anything to Reina, so the girl likely had no idea she had caused the incident.

“I’m gonna turn her down again if she does,” Nick said, shaking his head.

“You don’t want to take on an apprentice, Nick?” Karan asked, sounding excited by the idea.

“Sounds like a pain in the ass. I don’t think I’d be a good teacher, either.”

“It would be really funny, though. It’s easy to imagine a kid taking over your life.”

“It certainly is,” Bond agreed. Nick shrugged, looking less than thrilled at the thought.

“Gimme a break. That’s already my daily life with Bond,” he said.

“Excuse me?! I am the adult in this relationship!” Bond protested,

offended. The others couldn't help but chuckle.

Now that everyone had relaxed, Tiana spoke up. "By the way, Nick. What's the 'Steppingman' you mentioned earlier?"

"Huh? Have you never heard of it?" Nick asked. Tiana, Karan, and Zem all shook their heads.

"No idea."

"I've never heard of it."

"Neither have I."

Bond laughed confidently and shrugged. "What, and you call yourselves citizens of Labyrinth City? You three need to become more cultured, am I right, Nick?"

"It's not like it's useful knowledge. How do you know about it, Bond?"

"I read about it in an occult magazine."

"No wonder."

"Fill us in, you two," Tiana interjected impatiently.

"How should I explain it...? The Steppingman is some kind of monster, or ghost. Parents use it as a threat to scare their kids from going anywhere dangerous at night or sneaking off to a labyrinth. 'The Steppingman is gonna getcha,' and all that. Didn't you guys have something like that where you're from?" Nick explained.

"Oh, that's why the kids got scared," Tiana said.

"I admit, it was a bit mean of me to threaten them that way. I might've scared them too much."

"Hmm-hmm, but the Steppingman may be more than just a legend. There is actually prize money for it, after all," Bond said confidently. Tiana, however, was openly doubtful.

"Do you mean an actual reward, or is it just some cheap consolation gift?" she asked.

"No, it's real prize money. The Adventurers Guild is offering one million dina as a reward," Nick answered.

"...Why?" Tiana looked confused.

"It's 'cause of how long the legend has been around. Often, when a kid runs away from home or goes missing, the parents will insist it was the Steppingman and pay the guild to find them. There are plenty of other bounties for monsters that may or may not exist," Nick explained.

"I told you the Steppingman is real," Bond said proudly, but Nick quickly shook his head.

"My point is that the bounty proves nothing. All apparent sightings of the Steppingman are from drunks, too. Not exactly trustworthy," he said.

"No kid who believes a threat like that is going to make it as an adventurer," Tiana commented with a bitter smile.

“Exactly,” Nick agreed.

“You did the right thing if that threat is enough to get them to quit. Wait, the guild receptionists don’t try to stop them?”

“Nope. There are some kids who truly have no choice but to support themselves as adventurers. Kids aren’t always the best at explaining their circumstances, so it’s the guild’s policy to not pry.”

“That’s depressing...”

“Personally, I think the guild should stop kids who want to become an adventurer because they think it sounds fun.”

“I suppose that task falls to veteran adventurers like you, Nick,” Zem said.

“Please stop. I never want to act like I’m some know-it-all vet,” Nick protested, but his companions all grinned.

“What’s wrong with that? If children are being abducted by an evil monster, it’s up to us adventurers to protect them. It’s what the Lovely Paladin would do,” Tiana teased.

“That’s right. And she might be closer than you think,” Karan added. They all laughed as Nick’s expression grew more and more troubled.

“I am going home. I want to relax now that our adventure is done. Rest will come easy tonight, now that I know the Lovely Paladin is around to protect me,” Zem joked.

“Someone’s got their sense of humor back. You must be fine,” Nick said. He was relieved to see that Zem was looking better.

A woman approached the Survivors’ table after that exchange.

“Hey, Nick. Don’t talk about the paladin here. You’ll draw unwanted attention to yourselves.”

“Vilma? What brings you to Fishermen?” Nick asked.

She was an elderly woman and a former adventurer who now worked as a guild receptionist.

“I can visit any branch I want. I suggest you heed my warning. I’m saying it for your own good,” she responded.

Nick thought hard about her words. Rumors of the paladin had been spreading among the adventurers of Labyrinth City, and even magazines and newspapers were reporting on it. He was pretty sure there was no ban on talking about it.

The true identity of the paladin was a combination of Nick and Tiana using the power of the Sword of Bonds, which the Survivors were keeping a secret. *She would’ve approached us differently if she’d realized the truth. Is she trying to get us to slip up?* Nick thought suspiciously.

“That’s fine with me, I guess. I don’t have any interest in the paladin anyway. Is there some problem with talking about her?” Nick asked to sound her out. Vilma’s expression turned sour. He was afraid

for a moment that she actually had realized their secret, but she said something totally unexpected.

“A reporter’s been pestering us about it nonstop. You know the occult magazine we carry on our magazine rack? She works for—”

“Hey, did I hear someone mention the paladin?” interrupted a high-pitched voice.

“Who are you?” Nick asked, turning toward the speaker.

The voice came from a bespectacled woman with a pen behind her ear. Her neatly trimmed green hair made her look like a professional at first glance, but that was ruined by her thick, slightly dirty coat. Her odd vibe seemed to be a mix of the intimidating presence of adventurers and the slightly weird nature of Nick’s crazy idol friends.

“Olivia, how many times do I have to tell you, you can’t just keep butting into conversations to gather data for your articles!” Vilma shouted.

“Come on, I don’t see the problem. I’m an adventurer, too,” the woman named Olivia said.

“Only on the side. You’re a magazine reporter first and foremost, aren’t you?”

“Neither job is stable enough to be considered ‘first and foremost.’ So are you all trying to find the paladin, too?” Olivia ignored Vilma and rounded on the Survivors.

“Stay back,” Karan warned. She got up to force the reporter away, but startlement painted her face. “You’re really heavy...”

“Excuse me?! That’s super rude! I have been slacking on my diet, though...,” Olivia said, her anger quickly turning into dejection.

Nick stared in disbelief at how volatile she was.

“S-sorry,” Karan said.

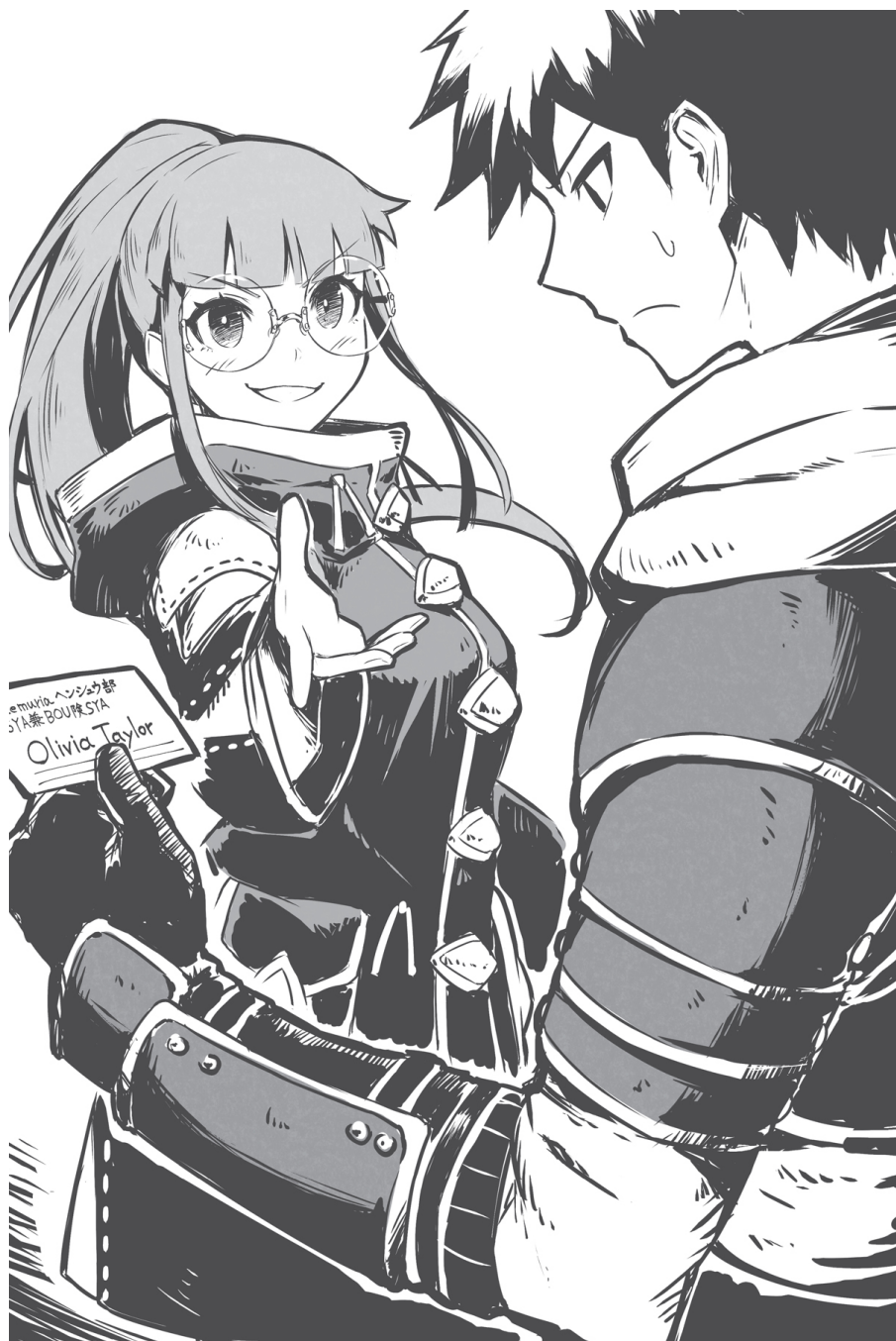
“Anyway, I won’t be pushy if you don’t want to talk. I just can’t help myself when it comes to these kinds of urban legends... Ah, here’s my business card.”

Olivia took a piece of paper out of her pocket and handed it to Nick.

“Lemuria Monthly Editorial Department. Reporter and Adventurer. Olivia Taylor,” Nick read aloud. Olivia gave a dubious smile.

“That’s me! I’ve been writing a bunch of articles about the paladin recently! I also look into other rumors, like the cat with a human face and the labyrinth said to exist underneath the city!”

“That’s all nothing but gossip,” Nick said.



“Well, that’s our field,” Olivia replied.

“Y-you’re a reporter for *Lemuria Monthly*?!” Bond exclaimed.

“Sounds like you know us. Are you a fan?”

“I read every issue!”

“Since when?” Nick muttered exasperatedly. Bond shrugged in disbelief.

“Good grief, Nick. Do you not remember the title of the magazine I showed you the other day? It was *Lemuria Monthly*.”

“It hasn’t even been a month since you learned that magazines exist,” Nick pointed out, eliciting yet another shrug from Bond.

“Haah... Love is not bound by the construct of time. I should think an idol fan like you would know better.”

“Grk...!”

Nick glowered, having no comeback.

“Well, that saves me from having to make the whole spiel. I’ll be there in a flash if you ever have something fishy to share about Labyrinth City! I can even give you some small rewards,” Olivia said.

“Rewards? What kind of rewards?” Tiana piped up immediately, but Vilma loudly cleared her throat.

“Typically, when people hear ‘rewards’ they think of cash, gift certificates, or fine confectionery, not unsold magazines or coupons that are about to expire,” she said.

“Don’t tell them that!” Olivia whined.

Nick soon gained a good sense of what was happening here. Olivia had most likely been stalking adventurers to find material to use in her articles about the paladin, which was annoying the guild to no end. As far as the guild knew, the paladin had nothing to do with them. Nick understood Vilma’s frustration.

“All right, let’s wrap it up. Good job today, guys. Our next adventure is in three days. Don’t be late,” Nick announced.

“Thank you, Nick. Until next time,” Zem said.

“See ya,” Karan replied.

“Have a good night. I need to hurry—I can still make it to the racetrack if I leave now,” Tiana said.

Everyone except for Bond picked up on Nick’s intention and stood up from the table.

“Awww man, I wanted to talk some more!” Olivia complained.

“Me too! I don’t want to go!” Bond whined.

“You can read all the magazines you want, but I don’t want you making suspicious friends,” Nick said, dragging Bond away from Olivia.

The Survivors left the guild.

The curtain began to lower onto the stage as the encore came to an end.

“Our next event is our Grand Fan Appreciation Concert! It’ll be at a huge venue, so make sure not to miss it!”

“Every Jewelry Production idol will be there! It’ll be a blast!”

“We’re going to give it our all, so please give us your support!”

The curtain finished its descent, blocking the stage lights completely, and a robotic voice sounded in the dark to announce the end of the performance.

The idol fans’ excitement didn’t subside at all as they left the venue.

“That was the best show I’ve ever seen! Thank you so much for inviting me!” a young man shouted gleefully on a street corner outside the venue. Normally, Nick would tell his friend to calm down, but he, too, was on a high after that concert.

“I’m glad you had a good time, Jonathan,” Nick responded.

“You’re an Agate fan, right? It’s Amber all the way for me! I knew she was my fave right away!” Jonathan proclaimed, thinking back on the show.

“Can’t fault you there. She’s a skilled dancer.”

“Oh, what a fool I was for spending money on that woman! *This* is what true love feels like!”

“Y-yeah.” Nick laughed awkwardly and nodded.

The two hadn’t known each other for long, but a strange connection tied them together—they had both been swindled by the same woman. One time when Nick was on the way to a concert, he ran into Jonathan trudging down the road alone. They hit it off immediately, and Nick invited him to the show. The experience turned Jonathan into just as big an idol fan as Nick.

“Who’s your fave, Bond?” Jonathan asked.

“Hmm, I do not have a particular favorite. I feel like Agate, Amber, and Topaz all have a radiance to their souls. They might have been worshipped as shamans in another era,” Bond answered.

“Shamans? Man, you really do like all that spiritual nonsense,” Nick said, a little creeped out.

“‘A radiance to their souls...’ That’s such a great way to put it. I would’ve thought you’d been an idol fan for years,” Jonathan remarked.

“A shaman is a real profession! And telepathy is an admirable field of magic!” Bond pouted.

“Wow, you’re so smart, Bond. Are you a student at a magic school or something?” Jonathan asked.

“No, I’m an adventurer.”

“That’s so cool... I admire adventurers. I don’t think I’d be cut out

for the job at all. There are a lot of bad people in the world, and I'm really gullible."

"Even adventurers get scammed by other adventurers sometimes," Nick said self-deprecatingly.

"Ah-ha-ha, you've got a point," Jonathan laughed. His condition had been steadily improving since Nick started inviting him to concerts, and now it seemed like he had fully recovered from the wounds Claudine had inflicted. "Ah, I need to get home. Thanks for inviting me, Nick!"

"Sure thing. See ya." He watched with satisfaction as Jonathan waved and walked away. "Wanna head back, too?" Nick asked Bond.

"Yes. That was more enjoyable than I expected. Perhaps I should go out with Zem next."

"I dunno about that idea. Can you even bring a kid into a hostess club?"

"Zem invited me, believe it or not."

"Seriously?"

"Though to be honest, he just wants me to distract that girl."

"What girl?"

"You know, the adventurer girl we met by Goopy Waterworks. Her name is Reina."

Nick grimaced when he remembered who he was talking about. "Oh, shoot. That could be bad for Zem."

"The girl has apparently been drawing ire for obstructing business in the hostess club. She is quite stubborn in her pursuit."

"Sounds like a pain in the ass, but we might need to set the girl straight. Is she following Zem right now?"

"I will check."

Bond licked his index finger and lifted it into the air. He was using a special ability that allowed him to sense the heart rate, body temperature, and other physical information of people registered as his wielders' comrades from a distance. There was no real meaning to the gesture—he just liked the feeling of "putting up an antenna," whatever that meant.

"Sense anything?" Nick asked.

"Zem is in danger," Bond answered grimly.

"Is that girl chasing him again? She doesn't know when to quit."

"No, it's worse than that. His body temperature and heart rate are elevated; he must be in combat."

"Holy crap. I wonder if he got into a brawl over a girl at a hostess club, or something..."

"He just started bleeding. His opponent has a sharp weapon."

"Where are they?" Nick asked, his voice turning serious. The peaceful expression he'd worn after the concert was gone, though he

was still wearing the blue coat he'd bought in support of Agate.

"He is east of here, by Labyrinth City's southeast gate."

It was known that the majority of slums were located in the east side of Labyrinth City, and the prevalence of adventurers in the south side created a particularly dangerous region in the southeast where the two sides met. The mesh of violent and poor people led to a lot of trouble. The region was chock-full of buildings that had been abandoned during construction and collapsing houses that no one had bothered to repair, and a small community of vagabonds and adventurer dropouts had developed. Even a full-fledged adventurer like Zem would be in trouble if he got in a fight in that part of the city.

"Let's go save him!" Bond shouted.

"H-hold on, you don't know where you're going! I'll guide you!"

"Fine, fine!"

Nick picked up Bond with one arm and ran.

Labyrinth City never slept. Night owls filled the streets in the evening when the night establishments Zem frequented entered their peak business hours.

The southeast district Nick and Bond were racing toward was particularly rough, even for Labyrinth City. There were drunks collapsed by the road and shady restaurants forcefully dragging in customers, and the scent of blood and sweat drifting from the back alleys told of fights. People watched Nick in annoyance as he sprinted down the streets, but they were used to the sight. They just sneered, assuming he was running from debt collectors or involved in a messy love triangle. Nick had no time to pay them any mind.

"Bond! Are we getting close?!" he yelled.

"He's over there!" Bond shouted back from under Nick's arm, thrusting a finger forward.

"What the hell?!"

Nick saw Zem being cornered by...nothing. If Bond hadn't told him that Zem was fighting, he probably would have assumed the man was just drunk. Despite that, Zem's expression was as serious as could be. There was something very wrong about this scene.

"The assailant is using magic to impede perception! Zem might as well be fighting an invisible enemy!" Bond proclaimed.

"Like a shadow wolf?!" Nick asked.

Shadow wolves were monsters that excelled at hiding in the dark. They used their speed and the darkness of the caves they inhabited to attack people, but they weren't that strong. Nick was hoping that this opponent would be similarly weak in combat, but Bond shook his head.

“This opponent is far more cunning. They are hiding themselves from sight by manipulating the minds of all those around. To you it looks like Zem is fighting nothing, I am sure.”

“Then what can we do?!”

“I can see them, vaguely. Let’s go!”

“Great! I’ll protect Zem!”

Bond drew his sword and swung it. The blade collided into nothing with the *clang* of metal on metal.

“Wha...? You can see me?!” said a strange voice that sounded androgynous. Nick repressed all questions about their identity and rushed to Zem’s aid.

“Zem! Are you okay?!” he asked.

“I’m fine. Please help the girl first!” Zem responded.

“What girl? Oh, her...”

Zem had been protecting a little girl. She was peacefully sleeping, which should have been an impossibility in this situation.

“Her name was Reina, right? Was she following you?”

“I believe she was searching for me in the red-light district. I found her just in time to prevent this invisible person from carrying her off. They must have drugged her or used some bewitching spell to put her to sleep.”

“Crap, it’s just like the Steppingman legend.”

“I have no interest in the occult, but it’s hard to ignore a being from an urban legend when it appears and tries to bash your head in,” Zem muttered darkly.

“Man, I don’t know how you managed to protect this girl... Bond just looks like he’s dancing to me,” Nick said as he watched Bond spin and swing his sword. He looked to be struggling.

“Help me, you fools! Th-this person is really strong!” he yelled.

“Eat this leaf, Nick. It’s a medicinal herb,” Zem said.

“Got it... Blech, this is disgusting!” Nick gagged.

“Please bear with the taste and chew it thoroughly. This is normally used to help with sobering up, but it also allows one to see through illusions.”

Nick did as he was told and chewed the leaf. The bitter taste was strong enough to get rid of drowsiness. A refreshing feeling washed over him a few moments later, and a faint figure became visible. It was a hooded person attacking Bond with chains. Nick couldn’t tell what they looked like. He could see the outline of their face, but for some reason, he couldn’t make out their features.

“Bond said something about impeding our perception. I guess the drug isn’t enough to dissolve the spell completely,” he said.

“It seems that way,” Zem responded.

“Bond’s probably having a hard time keeping track of them.”

Nick took a deep breath and dived into battle.

“About time, Nick!” Bond shouted as a set of chains whipped toward him like a snake. Nick blocked it with his dagger.

“Sorry for the wait,” he responded.

“These chains are strange. They look like a magic tool, but they’re much stronger than the mana I detect from them would suggest.”

“Magic tools are no different than any other weapon. Some wield weapons in perverted ways after achieving a high level of mastery.”

“If they’re so skilled, why are they preying on children like some kind of pedophile?”

“Beats me... Hey bud, do you still wanna do this? Fighting in the middle of the street is gonna attract the Sun Knights. I don’t mind that, personally—I know a good lawyer who can get me outta trouble. What about you, though? Got any good doctor or lawyer friends?” Nick asked a leading question.

The hooded person stopped moving in response to Nick’s words. A moment later, the chains slithered back into their sleeves, coiling around their arms until they were out of sight. Those none the wiser would have thought they were unarmed.

Nick was a little relieved. They only traded two or three blows, but he could tell his opponent was superior in strength. They weren’t at Argus’s level, but they were stronger than the rest of Nick’s former Combat Masters party members, and clearly stronger than him and Karan.

The hooded person capitalized on Nick’s momentary lapse in concentration and dashed to the side with tremendous speed to try to snatch the girl behind Zem.

“Ngh...,” Zem groaned, moving to protect the girl.

“No, Zem! They’re aiming for you!” Nick yelled, just before the hooded person fiercely kicked the former priest.

“Gah!” Zem grunted in pain.

The hooded person was swift and cunning. They went after Zem and tried to use his momentary lapse in strength to grab the girl. They also foiled Nick and Bond’s attempt to attack them from behind by using their chains to pick up and hurl wooden barrels and trash that were scattered on the ground.

“Dammit... How did they get so good with those chains...?!” Nick cursed.

“What should we do, Nick?!” Bond asked.

Nick was unsure, but the longer he took to make up his mind, the worse Zem would get hurt. Their opponent wasn’t just cunning—they were a stubborn perfectionist. Nick felt a chill when he realized the hooded person intended to kill all witnesses of this incident.

“Bond, return to your sword form!” Nick commanded.

“Understood! What are you going to do?” Bond asked before turning back into a sword. A blade of light emerged from the hilt.

“This!” Nick said, grabbing the sword and throwing it as hard as he could.

The hooded person reflexively deflected Bond—or rather, the Sword of Bonds—with their chains.

“Got you!” Bond yelled.

“Wh-what?!” the hooded person shouted. Bond assumed his human form again to take advantage of their opponent’s confusion.

“We’re just getting started!” he yelled, and split his body into two copies of himself. This was one of his special spells called Parallel, which allowed him to duplicate his human body and freely control both copies. One Bond slashed at the hooded person, while the other moved to defend Zem. Nick then swung his sword at their bewildered opponent from behind.

“Tch.”

Before Nick’s sword made contact, though, the hooded figure leaped incredibly high into the air and wrapped their chains around roofs and pillars to skillfully swing away. Their uncanny agility seemed more grasshopper-like than human.

“They withdrew as soon as they realized I had caught them off guard. They’re definitely a professional,” Nick said.



He was awed by how quickly and skillfully the person had retreated. It would have been unthinkable just a moment earlier that they would have chosen to flee, given how tenaciously they had been fighting. Nick was quite confident in his fighting ability, but he had to admit he had completely lost this time. He knew he would have died if this had been a fight to the death. That said, he had survived, and he planned to make the most of it.

“Hey, Zem! Are you okay?!”

“Yes. I am quite good at self-healing,” Zem answered with a weak smile. True to his word, he had closed his wounds himself. He was clearly exhausted, though, and looked like he could collapse at any moment.

“Zem, you need to rely on us at times like this. You don’t need to fight on equal footing with someone who is looking to kill you,” Nick said.

“But I can’t turn my back and abandon others when they’re in danger... Grk,” Zem grunted.

“You used too much mana. Grab my hand.”

“I am fine. Please, take care of this girl first.”

“...Yeah. Got it.”

Nick picked up Reina and carried her on his back, and set out into the nightlife district.

“Oh, Zemmy dear. This place may be both a bar and a law office, but it is in no way a hospital. It’s not a charity, either,” Redd said with a sigh. Nick, Zem, Bond, and Reina had just stumbled into the bar called Anemone Alehouse. Redd was the bar’s assistant manager.

“Sorry. The rest of Zem’s regular shops looked busy,” Nick responded.

“Oh, well how lucky for you this place is so unpopular! We’re just as dead as ever today! The few drunken idiots who do grace our establishment are always starting fights, so if you want bandages and medicine, we’ve got them!” Redd vented angrily. They threw a wet towel and some bandages at them, and Nick caught them. “Wipe your face, sweetie. You shouldn’t let yourself get so dirty.”

“Th-thank you...,” Reina responded, after Redd gave her a wet towel as well. The girl had woken up as Nick carried her to the bar, but she still had a glazed expression. “U-umm... You saved me, didn’t you? I’m sorry.”

“First, can you tell me what you were doing and what just happened?” Nick asked.

“U-umm...”

Reina began to talk about herself haltingly. She hadn’t given up

on becoming their apprentice, even after their refusal, and had tried to learn what she could about them after returning to Labyrinth City. When she learned that Zem frequented hostess clubs, she searched for him in the nightlife district and once again asked him to take her under his wing. She said she would even act as his servant if that was what it took for him to take her as an apprentice. Naturally, Zem refused her again. When he did, she said something that caught his attention—children who are the same age as her were being targeted and kidnapped.

“Who’s targeting children? That person from before? Who in the world are they?” Nick inquired, but Reina looked down without answering. He was at a loss for what to do.

“Don’t press her like that, Nick. You’re scaring her,” Redd chastised.

“I am not!” Nick objected.

“Okay, maybe not, but she’s clearly stressed. She just went through a terrifying ordeal.”

“Yeah... You have a point.”

Redd was right. Nick couldn’t expect Reina to be able to speak with a clear mind after almost being abducted, especially when she didn’t even know who the culprit was. Besides, maintaining public order wasn’t his job—that was the responsibility of the Sun Knights. There wasn’t much he could do about the situation.

“Do you have any parents? If you do, go back home and get some sleep. You must be exhausted. You should eat something first if you’re hungry,” Nick said. Redd nodded in agreement. Reina, however, lifted her head with a determined expression.

“I have Mama, but...she’s in the hospital. I’m the only one at home, so I don’t need to go back,” she said.

“Why’s she in the hospital?” Nick asked.

“She got hurt fighting that kidnapper,” Reina answered.

“You mean that weird person who can make themselves invisible?”

Reina nodded.

“That person...is the Steppingman!” she shouted.

Reina’s mom was named Ada. She was a former adventurer who was skilled enough to join a C-rank party. She had burly arms and beastlike instincts and was known to be a capable fighter and scout. Unfortunately, because of her poor behavior and drinking habits, she’d gained an infamous reputation as a troublemaker with little sense of virtue. She’d moved about from party to party until she’d finally found one with a reliable leader who was able to rein her in.

It was around that time when Ada became pregnant. The father

was the leader, who had been keeping her behavior in check. And to take responsibility, the man proposed marriage, but Ada turned him down. Most adventurers were ruffians who struggled to make ends meet, and she didn't think the two of them would be able to build a healthy household. She couldn't imagine marriage would suddenly transform her into a proper wife, either. As such, she decided to raise Reina alone. She'd been raised by a single mother herself, so having no father around was normal to her.

Despite all that, she didn't break up with the party leader, and the man did his best to act as Reina's father. He met the two of them frequently and provided money for child-rearing and living expenses. They weren't wealthy, but the two were able to provide a small and happy environment for Reina to grow up in.

Then one day, the man died during an adventure. Although she had decided to not marry him, Ada still mourned his death and drowned her sorrows in alcohol. She quit working as an adventurer and started working odd jobs, including serving as a bouncer at a bar. As she lost people's trust, her reputation shifted from "an unruly person who was good at heart" to "a loser who relies entirely on her daughter's part-time salary."

"Man, you're harsh on your mom," Nick said, taken aback by Reina's explanation.

"N-no, she's not a bad person! I swear!" Reina insisted.

Ada must have a very blunt personality, Nick thought. He felt like Reina might be a bit of a troublemaker, too, but he kept that to himself.

"Uh, so... What happened with your mom? How is she connected to this incident?" he asked.

"Mama was the first to notice that a lot of kids have been going missing lately. And she said that the Steppingman, the one who walks on top of roofs and walls, is taking them," Reina explained.

"The Steppingman, huh...", Nick responded doubtfully.

"Mama said the same thing you did."

"What's that?"

"That the kidnapper might be a normal person hiding behind the legend of the Steppingman."

"Oh, I see..."

"Mama went out into the night district to defeat the Steppingman, but they took her out instead... She's in the hospital and still hasn't woken up yet."

"Does she have any friends? You said she's a former adventurer."

Nick had a good idea of who Ada was. She was likely the same Ada they'd discussed on the way back from Martial Triffid Forest. He had never met her, but he had heard she was remarkably skilled at

labyrinth exploration and investigation. He had also heard she had the rough disposition of a lone wolf. That all checked out with Reina's story.

"No, her party broke up a long time ago. I don't remember what any of the members looked like," Reina said.

"That figures," Nick responded.

"So that is what happened... I am surprised to learn that you are Ada's daughter," Zem remarked.

"Same for me," Redd said. They both sounded as if they had known Reina for some time, despite having just met her.

"We really were talking about the same person, Zem," Nick said.

"Seems that way," he replied with a strained smile. "Like I was saying before, she does not have the best reputation at the hostess clubs around here. I find it likely that the ones she asked for help rebuffed her."

"Her reputation is that bad, huh?" Nick asked.

"She's not a bad person at heart, though...", Redd said. He and Zem both smiled wryly. Reina, who was on the verge of tears, tried to speak.

"Y-yeah! She's not a bad person, but...but..." She trailed off into silence. She knew Zem's comment about her mother's reputation was the truth and couldn't object.

Nick understood how she felt. His old party, Combat Masters, was often ridiculed despite being known for their fighting prowess. The worst part was that his party members brought it upon themselves with their idiotic behavior. They were good-natured people, yet clearly flawed. Nick felt a pang of nostalgia for the frustration he felt over being unable to defend them.

"Maybe she's not so bad, Zem. It's not rare for a person to have a drinking problem," Nick said, trying to lighten the mood.

"I am not necessarily doubting her story. It seems I had the wrong idea about your mother," Zem said, turning to Reina with a kind and firm look in his eyes.

"Huh?" Reina responded.

"It would be silly to reject her story outright after fighting the robed figure ourselves. We have plenty of proof that the criminal truly exists and was not some kind of spirit. My wounds, for one. Nick and Bond saw the person with their own eyes. And your mother who has been hospitalized."

"Oh..." Reina stared at Zem with a dumbfounded expression.

"The criminal is cunning and strong. For your mother to fight such an opponent is proof of her kindness. She is not the person who people say she is."

"Th-thank you!" Reina jumped up and tried to grab Zem's hand

just like she did the first day she'd met them.

"Back off," Nick commanded, blocking her.

"Go easy on him," Redd said, also standing in her way.

"What? Huh?" Reina appeared confused. Zem breathed a sigh of relief.

"Anyway, to sum it up, there's a kidnapper resembling the Steppingman in Labyrinth City, and Reina's mom was injured fighting them," Nick said.

"Hmph. That was not the Steppingman," Bond interjected, breaking his long silence. "They are using a barrier that prevents others from seeing them. There is not one mystical thing about that. They could have used wind magic or a strengthening spell to jump that high, or less likely, gravity magic. Regardless, they did nothing that can't be pulled off with modern magic and technology, even if the execution would be slightly difficult."

"You were able to tell all that, Bond? That's amazing," Nick said in a rare bit of praise. Bond responded with a bored sigh.

"What a disappointment. I thought the Steppingman would be much more fantastical... This kidnapper is hardly worthy of an article in *Lemuria Monthly*. We'll just have to catch them like a common crook," he complained.

"That's what you're upset about? Well, whatever the case, it's true that they're a kidnapper. This person is clearly dangerous," Nick said. Reina clenched her fists angrily.

"Y-yeah! We can't let such a bad person go free!" she yelled.

"Heh, I get it now. That's why you tried to become an adventurer and searched for someone who could teach you."

"That's right... No one would believe me, so I thought I'd just catch the Steppingman myself."

"Did you tell your mom you were going to do this? Do you really think she'd be okay with it?" Nick asked. Reina fell silent. That was a sufficient answer. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"B-but no one will listen to me! All the kids who've disappeared are known for misbehaving and going out alone at night, so everyone just says they probably ran away from home. No one will even look for them," Reina protested.

"So you decided you couldn't rely on the adults and tried to form a party of children instead," Nick said, finally seeing the full picture. That was why she was so stubborn about her party continuing their adventure outside of Gooley Waterworks, and why she asked Zem to take her on as an apprentice. It was all because she wanted to do something about the Steppingman.

"Yeah... No one believed me. My friends listened to me, but they didn't really believe me, either, and the party broke up. I have nobody

left,” Reina responded.

“I guess you’re right. Until just now, that is,” Nick declared.

Reina and Zem both gasped in surprise. No one looked happier than Bond.

“Nick, has the hero within you awakened?! I could not be prouder to see that you are ready to perform your duty as the wielder of a holy sword,” he gushed.

“Uh, no.”

“What do you mean?!”

“I’m not volunteering outta the goodness of my heart. But there is a kidnapper out there, and the Sun Knights have no idea what’s going on. On top of that, it’s happening here in the southeast district. That means we can take this on as a job. I never explained the third way that adventurers can make money.”

“What would that be?” Zem asked with great interest.

“The first way is through labyrinth exploration. What’s the second?” Nick asked.

“Collecting materials in labyrinths. I have not heard of the third way.”

Nick grinned and nodded.

“Bounty hunting.”

Manhunt



While the Adventurers Guild had many branches in Labyrinth City, the following six were the most important: Newbies, which was intended for novice adventurers; Fishermen, which was meant for intermediate adventurers; Pioneers, which was geared toward veteran adventurers; Travelers, which mainly dealt with jobs taking place outside of Labyrinth City, such as escort jobs; the guild headquarters, which was the base for the officials who managed the Adventurers Guild and a select few elite adventurers...

“And last is the branch called Manhunt,” Nick explained as the Survivors walked toward the guild he just mentioned.

“That sounds dangerous,” Tiana commented.

“Honestly, it is a little more dangerous than other branches. There are some who are better suited to fighting people than monsters. Some adventurers just work there because they’re the type who get riled up about justice and all that, though.”

Manhunt was where adventurers gathered, seeking bounties put out for criminals. One could even say the branch contributed to maintaining public order.

It was the Sun Knights’ job to keep the peace in Labyrinth City, and while they had great influence, they couldn’t protect every corner of the city. They particularly didn’t have much of a presence in the slums of Labyrinth City’s southeast district. To the Sun Knights, being assigned to the southeast district was a demotion. This led to low morale, leniency with the rules, and rampant corruption among the knights stationed there. Many crimes were overlooked as a result.

Labyrinth City government officials who were concerned about the situation in the southeast district turned to the Adventurers Guild for help. To crack down on the worst criminals, the guild responded

by establishing a branch that specialized in bounty hunting. As a result, the task of preventing the rise of ill-behaved criminal organizations that would destroy public order fell to similarly ill-behaved adventurers.

"It's an unsavory place. I don't really wanna go there, but we need information," Nick said with a sigh.

"My apologies for roping you into my personal problems like this," Zem said.

"Oh, I didn't mean it like that. I'm already on board with catching this guy, and all kinds of information ends up at this branch. We should learn as much as we can before we take them on again," Nick replied.

"Sounds like you two had a rough night," Tiana said, looking at Nick and Zem with amusement.

"I never thought in my wildest dreams that I'd run into a monster out of an urban legend," Nick responded.

"You said the Steppingman attacked you last night, right?" Tiana asked.

"Well, we don't know if they were actually the Steppingman, but yeah. At the very least, there's a dangerous kidnapper out there."

"What did you do with the girl who was almost kidnapped?"

"She's at a cross-dressing bar."

"Why am I not surprised...?" Tiana said with a glare.

"You have the wrong idea," Nick responded.

"Don't worry. I determined that was the safest place for her," Zem assured her.

"Really?"

"The junior mistress there also works as a lawyer. If any harm were to come to them, other lawyers and acquaintances would not keep quiet about it. The Steppingman knows what Reina looks like, and her mother is in the hospital, so having her stay at Anemone Alehouse is much safer than sending her home," Zem said.

"That makes sense... Does this mean you're over your fear of little girls?" Tiana asked. Zem shook his head.

"I wish that were the case. Talking with Reina has been very taxing."

"So why are you helping her?"

"I may not be fond of young girls, but I am even less fond of anyone who would prey on them," Zem said matter-of-factly, but everyone could sense the passion in his words.

"I'm with you there," Tiana agreed with a smile.

"Anyway, the third way for adventurers to make money after labyrinth exploration and material collecting is bounty hunting. Our current goal is to catch the Steppingman. Everyone good with that?"

Nick asked. The others nodded resolutely.

Despite being midday, it was dark inside Manhunt, giving it an enticing atmosphere reminiscent of a bar. The only thing it was missing was waitresses to serve the tables. The adventurers inside surreptitiously watched the Survivors and seemed distrustful of them. Nick didn't chat with anyone like he normally would at Fishermen; instead, he walked briskly to reception without a single interaction.

"We're a party called the Survivors. We'd like to check out your information on the Steppingman," Nick said.

"Uh, are you hobbyists or something?" the receptionist asked.

"No, it's for work. There's a bounty, isn't there?"

The receptionist was a female deerian covered in piercings. She fiddled with her nails and looked at the Survivors listlessly. "That's even worse, bud. Those three are rookies, aren't they? Only adventurers who have a good track record at this branch can access details on larger bounties."

"Oh crap," Nick cursed. "Sorry, I forgot about that."

"Well that's rare," Tiana remarked with a grin.

"I haven't spent much time bounty hunting...," Nick grumbled.

"I wish you'd stayed in Combat Masters. You were just as good at fighting people as you are with monsters," muttered the receptionist with piercings.

"Sorry to disappoint you."

"You're in a new party now, so this technically counts as your first time here. The rules are the rules, so you'll just have to do some jobs and work your way up. How 'bout this one?"

The receptionist presented a document with a sketch, profile, and a reward. Nick read it aloud.

"Hale Hardy. Twenty-five years old. Formerly worked at a bar. Currently unemployed. He is thought to be hiding in the Garbage Heap in Labyrinth City's southeast district. He is charged with operating an unlicensed brothel as well as fraud and assault. Yet to be confirmed, but he is also suspected of murder and slave-trading. The reward is three hundred thousand dina."

"Not bad, huh? That's a decent reward, too," the receptionist said.

"That means it's a difficult job. You shouldn't give this to a team of rookies."

"Oh, come on, surely you guys can handle it. You're the party that took down the Iron Tiger Troop, after all."

The receptionist's words rippled through the guild. The adventurers who had been watching them with contempt and curiosity reacted in two very different ways. Some looked at them with something resembling respect...

“Tch, goddamn glory hounds.”

...while others eyed them with open jealousy and hostility.

“Who said that? If you have a problem with us, say it to our faces,” Tiana shouted.

“What was that?!” a rough-looking adventurer yelled. He tried to rush toward the Survivors, but another adventurer held him back.

“Drop it,” the man restraining the enraged adventurer said.

“You’re holding him back?!” Nick exclaimed.

“Yeah... We don’t have any ill will toward you. I’ll calm this guy down, so quit provoking him,” he responded.

“Got it. Hear that, Tiana?”

“Oh, fine,” she said, reluctantly backing down.

Nick understood why some adventurers would resent them. The Iron Tiger Troop likely operated primarily within the turf of the Manhunt guild. Some of the adventurers here might have been victims, and others might have been targeting the Iron Tiger Troop in anticipation of a bounty. In a way, the Survivors had upstaged them at their own game. But that didn’t mean the receptionist had to announce what they’d done for all to hear.

“Hey, what gives?” Nick asked, glaring at the woman. She smiled flippantly in response.

“People would’ve found out within a day, anyway. These adventurers like to gossip more than a noble’s wife. No one will bother you if you show them you can handle a job of this difficulty... But if you want to take on a smaller job, I won’t stop you.”

The deerian receptionist presented another piece of paper. The job was to catch a thief, with a reward of around fifty thousand dina; it was clearly a lower-level job than the one for Hale Hardy.

“You put out bounties for people who commit minor crimes like this, too?” Zem asked.

“Only for habitual offenders,” the woman answered.

Nick compared the bounties and thought catching a bunch of minor criminals wouldn’t get them anywhere. The former felt like it would be more worthwhile.

“What do you guys think? Personally—”

“This one,” Karan interrupted.

“The one with the higher reward,” Tiana agreed.

They both pointed at the bounty for Hale without hesitation. That was no surprise to Nick.

“I agree,” Zem said.

“I approve as well,” Bond chimed in.

“Sweet. That decides it,” Nick said.

“Take care of it by the end of the week if you can. He might flee from Labyrinth City if he really did kill someone,” the receptionist

said.

"You're not just giving us a job that has no hope of success, are you?" Nick asked in an accusatory tone.

"Think about it this way: I'll pay you handsomely if you actually pull it off," she responded with a wink.

"How much free time do you think we have...? Well, whatever. This is a job," Nick said, sounding reluctant.

"Leave if you're gettin' cold feet!" the man who had to be restrained earlier shouted. The adventurer who was holding him back was now grimacing with a hand over the man's mouth. It was clear he was mentally exhausted by his companion's idiotic behavior.

This is gonna turn into a fight, isn't it? Nick thought. He typically liked to avoid that kind of trouble, but he also lacked the patience to ignore someone who was picking a fight with him for very long. As if sensing his mood, Karan tugged on his sleeve.

"It'll be fine, Nick. I don't mind this kind of work. Also... Pulling it off will be a great chance to show them all what we can do," she said with a smile. It was clear that she wasn't just trying to calm him down—she was fired up for the challenge ahead of them.

"You bet! We're gonna catch this guy, just you watch!" Tiana declared for all to hear, causing the buzz in the guild to grow louder.

"Who the hell d'ya rookies think you are?!"

"Amateurs like you should stick to fighting goblins in labyrinths!"

"Hey, let's bet on whether or not they'll catch Hale."

Some adventurers even began to place bets. One quick-thinking man took off his hat and used it to collect the money. A man who was glaring at the party bet on them to fail. Just when Nick thought this situation was getting out of hand, Tiana tossed multiple gold coins into the hat.

"What is wrong with you?! Don't be so careless with your money!" Nick shouted.

"I bet fifty thousand dina that we'll succeed," Tiana said.

That caused a stir in the guild. It took a special kind of bravery—or stupidity—to wager that much money when the gambling wasn't publicly managed. The adventurers looked at Tiana with total bewilderment.

"Aren't you gonna put your money where your mouth is?" Tiana asked, glaring at the man who'd had to be restrained. He avoided her gaze and reached for his wallet.

"I bet that you'll fail!" he shouted.

Geez, these people are hopeless, Nick thought. *There was no reason to worry about coming here.*

"Dear me. Some people just can't help themselves," Zem remarked.

“You take gambling problems to a new level,” Bond said, shrugging his shoulders.

Nick could only give a strained laugh. He preferred the current atmosphere to the open contempt they were receiving earlier.

“All right, let’s get to it. You’d better get that reward money and those wagers ready!” Nick said, and led his companions out of Manhunt.

The bounty hunt had commenced.

Most of the southeast district of Labyrinth City was unsafe, but the most dangerous part of it by far was an abandoned construction site that had come to be known as the Garbage Heap. There had been plans to build a city hall at the site, but the person in charge was caught embezzling the money meant for the general contractor, and the structure was deemed unsafe because of corners cut in construction. The rampant fraud and laziness led to the project being left unfinished.

The first people to settle down in the abandoned area were the construction workers who had lost their jobs. Fugitives in Labyrinth City who had nowhere else to go flooded there next. The population grew until the unfinished building became cramped, and the people took it on themselves to alter and expand it. But while there were many people among them with the engineering skills, they lacked those with the talent to oversee the construction. The wild and disorderly expansion resulted in the Garbage Heap, an infamous zone that could be considered a labyrinth within the city.

The Survivors were standing before the graffiti-riddled gate at the edge of the building. It looked like an entrance to another world.

“Sorry about this whole detour, Zem,” Nick said.

“Huh? We came right here from Manhunt,” Zem responded.

“That’s not what I meant.” Nick chuckled quietly at his misunderstanding.

“It’s okay. The Steppingman may be our goal, but we must focus on the work before us as well. Besides, it would have been impossible to find the Steppingman on my own. Getting overly worked up would get me nowhere.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Also...” Zem trailed off.

“What is it?”

“Never mind. More importantly... Are we allowed to just walk through?”

“Well... Sort of,” Nick said hesitantly.

“Have you been here before, Nick?” Karan asked, looking dubious after Nick’s reaction.

“My old party went bounty hunting quite a bit. Our leader wasn’t fond of it, though, and quickly made labyrinth exploration our main focus... Anyway, this is the entrance. Let’s talk to the gatekeeper,” Nick explained.

“There’s a gatekeeper... Is someone going to attack us?” Tiana asked, looking annoyed.

“That can happen. The people here treat visitors differently depending on their purpose for coming. This usually goes down one of three ways.”

“And what are they?”

“First, people gang up and attack Sun Knights. They don’t take kindly to them.”

“That’s extreme...”

“They might get evicted from their homes otherwise. Next, they welcome with open arms anyone who wants to settle down here. No one spends much time looking after newcomers, but anyone who wants to move in will get a place to sleep indoors, and if they have useful connections or skills, they’ll be let into a clique that’ll provide them with work and food.”

“What’s the third way?”

“They let bounty hunters and anyone else looking for someone through, but...”

“Yeah?”

“Well, you’ll see in a second. Let’s go.”

Nick led the others to the graffiti-covered gate. There were shabbily dressed people sitting and lying down around it. Among them, an unhealthily skinny man glanced at the Survivors and addressed them.

“Never seen y’all ’round here before... You bounty hunters?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Nick responded.

“Then we can’t provide ya any guards. In exchange, we won’t help your idiotic target,” the man said.

“Got it. We don’t need a guard or a guide,” Nick said, shaking his head.

Karan looked at the man with a puzzled expression. “Do we look like we need them?”

“The guards here don’t put their bodies on the line to save ya or nothin’ like that. They just act as an intermediary to tell people not to attack ya. Goin’ in without one means anythin’ could happen,” the man explained.

“So people attack you here, instead of monsters... Well, either way, we don’t need any guards,” Karan said.

“I like you, girl. Do y’all need information?” the man asked,

extending his hand and cackling.

Nick gave him some copper coins. "You can keep it brief. Has anything of note happened here lately that we should know about?"

"The other day some moron blew a hole through the roof of the assembly hall with a spell. That started a fight between the people of that turf and the folks who live in the barracks at Astral Square. Steer clear of Astral Square if ya don't wanna get involved."

"Got it."

"I got one more warnin' for ya. Don't bother Nargava while he's workin'."

"Nargava? Who's that?"

"He's a priest. There's a new rule 'round here not to interrupt worship or healin'."

"Wow... This place is mellowing out," Nick responded, surprised.

"Even places like this have a priest," Zem said, sounding impressed.

"That's right. Now move along." The man pointed impatiently with his chin.

The Survivors walked through the gate.

"It stinks," Karan grumbled, pinching her nose in disgust.

"That's 'cause the ventilation and plumbing are busted," Nick explained.

The Survivors were walking through the abandoned construction site that had become the Garbage Heap. The buildings were all cramped, with low ceilings, but the area was surprisingly vast. The people had expanded the zone over time by using the construction materials left between buildings to make their own arcade streets, pathways, and even additional rooms. No one took on the responsibility of cleaning the buildings, however, and they were becoming uninhabitable even as they were expanded.

"Hold it."

The place was made even more unsavory by the rough behavior of its residents. Thievery was so commonplace, it seemed to have become a casual form of greeting.

"You guys ain't from around here, are ya?"

"You'll hafta pay a toll if ya wanna go any far— OOF?!"

Two thieves had reached for their sword and ax, respectively, but Nick punched one and Bond hit the other with the back of his sword, knocking them both out.

"Some will attack as soon as they see an outsider, so keep your eyes open," Nick warned.

"This place is even worse than I imagined," Zem said.

"Yeah, it's ridiculous...", Tiana agreed.

They both sighed wearily.

"There's no need to fear. You can rely on me to detect any people who approach with a blade," Bond said confidently. And the party truly relied on him as he used his excellent hearing and vision to detect ruffians and alert the group of their approach.

"We're counting on you. All right, Zem. Wake one of them up. I wanna ask about Hale's whereabouts," Nick said.

"Ah, is that how one gets information here?" Zem asked.

"Well, sort of. It's more that the only thing that's not allowed is attacking the gatekeeper we spoke to earlier. After that, anything goes."

"I see. Who should I wake up?"

"The one with the mohawk seems to be the leader."

"Yes, I think so, too."

Zem approached the unconscious man with the mohawk and chanted a healing spell.

"Nrgh... Wh-who are you?!" the man shouted.

"We're asking the questions. Do you know where Hale is?" Nick asked. The man tried to attack him, but Nick grabbed his arms and twisted them behind his back.

"Dammit! Lemme go!"

"Get real, man. You're the one who attacked us."

"Okay, okay! By Hale, do ya mean that womanizer?!"

"He's a former host, so probably."

"He's in the Bedchamber."

"The Bedchamber?"

"That's what we call the building on the east side that was gonna be a lodging house. He's workin' as a con man over there."

"All right, that's all we needed to know."

"Hey, pay me for that info!"

Nick was fed up with the man's shameless behavior. He opened his mouth to snap at him for demanding money after attacking them but was interrupted when Zem stepped forward.

"You do not have long left to live," he said gently.

"Huh? What're ya talkin' about...?" the man responded.

"You're taking some dangerous drugs, aren't you?"

"Mind your own business!"

"Are the drugs the leaf or seed variety that you ingest by chewing? Or do you snort them through your nose as powder? Does taking them put you in a dark mood, or does it make you feel elated?"

"Wh-what do you want?"

"Just answer me."

Zem's overbearing attitude made the man flinch, but seeing that he had no choice, he began to tell Zem about the drugs he took and

his current situation.

"I—I can't sleep. It's not my fault! There's no way I can live a decent life here. You guys wouldn't get it," he vented.

"I see...," Zem said after listening to the man quietly. He then produced a handful of leaves from his pocket. "These are medicinal herbs with a sedative effect. You can consider this payment for the information you shared. These are not strong drugs, so you will have to do your best to adjust. Try not to rely on the ones you have been taking."

"O-okay, fine."

"I'm giving you extra. Share it with your friend when he wakes up."

The man took the herbs, clearly flustered. Zem ignored his bewilderment and turned back to his party members.

"Shall we go, everyone?" he asked. The man with the mohawk hurriedly stopped him.

"W-wait. Hale's an escape artist. Be careful he doesn't find out you're after him," he said.

"We will take that to heart," Zem replied.

"There's some other things you should be careful of, too...," he began, and like a broken faucet, he spilled all the useful information he could think of. He gave them details about the Bedchamber, including where the guards commonly appeared. He said that most women were smitten with Hale and wouldn't speak as easily as he did. In the end, he gave them even more information than they needed. Zem patted him on the shoulder as thanks, and the man smiled happily and waved when the party walked away. He looked like a puppy who loved its master unconditionally.

The rest of the party was struck with wonder at Zem's enchanting charisma as they walked through the Garbage Heap to capture Hale.

"You really didn't need to go that far to pay him for that information," Nick said.

"Perhaps not... I may have done that because I saw myself in him," Zem replied with a self-deprecating smile.

"Felt a sense of kinship with him?"

"Yes. I may have ended up living here myself if I had not become an adventurer."

"Yeah... That's definitely possible."

It wasn't hard for Nick to imagine the same thing for himself. He could have ended up here, too, if he hadn't met his party members and continued working as an adventurer. He probably would've spilled his guts for Zem, too, if he had been in that man's shoes.

"Hey, quit dawdling!" Bond urged, and Nick and Zem resumed walking.

Bond took the lead as the Survivors headed for the Bedchamber. They used Bond's Search ability to gain a nearly perfect grasp of the zone's layout and the whereabouts of the people within it. All they had to do now was stay away from danger and defeat the enemies they couldn't avoid.

"Hmm... Piecing together what I can detect from my Search ability and the information that man provided, we should climb this iron pole. There are rods at regular intervals, see? It's a fire escape ladder," Bond said.

"If we have to...", Nick responded.

The Survivors advanced through the labyrinthine structure, making rapid progress as they climbed what looked like maintenance ladders, crawled through air vents, and found doors hidden behind giant trash cans. All the windows had been boarded so that not even the tiniest sliver of sunlight got through. As a result, the corridors were illuminated only by flickering, dying magic lamps that gave the interior a bewitching pink glow. It was impossible to tell if it was day or night. It almost looked like the inside of a monster, despite being man-made.

"Get down and hold your breath. Patrols are approaching," Bond warned.

"Got it," Nick responded.

"There are two of them, and we have nowhere to hide. We must knock them out."

"Fine. I'll take care of it."

Nick warmed up by bending his fingers, wrists, shoulders, and elbows in unusual directions. As someone who practiced martial arts, he always made sure to stretch to remain flexible. Tiana often poked fun at him by asking if he was a mollusk reborn.

"Shh!"

Nick sprang to action, showing the fruits of his training. He hid from view with catlike flexibility and whipped out an arm to strike one of the patrols in the chin. The other patrol started casually chatting, unaware that his comrade had been knocked out.

"Oh yeah, let's share a drink after we finish our shift, William. I've still got that nice vintage I stole."

"William won't be drinking tonight."

"Wh-who was that?!"

Nick swiftly struck the other man in the neck, rendering him unconscious. He had subdued them both without inflicting a single scratch.

"Man, fighting people instead of monsters has a whole different kinda pressure," he said with a loud sigh.

"We would've had a hard time in here without you and Bond. This

has been a cinch,” Tiana said.

“Yeah, there’s no room to cast spells or swing a greatsword. I’d appreciate it if we took on more jobs like this every now and then,” Nick responded.

“Only every now and then,” Karan said. She was sometimes uncomfortable with the idea of having Nick fight up front. She was leaving it to him for now, but that didn’t mean she was in total agreement.

“Don’t worry. I can handle it.”

“I-I’m not worried.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m really not!” She continued haltingly while looking down in embarrassment. “I know we can depend on you for places like this. Actually, we have no choice but to rely on you. But that’s...that’s why I want you to be careful. Like I’ve said before, you would all be fine if I died. Except if you died, we’d be finished.”

“Hmm, that is a sound argument. It is the correct choice to let Nick to fight here, but he should not be so eager to do so,” Bond agreed.

At Bond’s words, Nick realized he had felt excited as he stretched and waited for the patrols to arrive.

“Urk... My bad,” he apologized.

“Did my words bring about a revelation?” Bond asked with a smirk.

“I’m pretty confident I can defeat any opponent I can fight with my fists. And being helpful at work makes me feel happy and fulfilled.”

“You are quite skilled when it comes to hand-to-hand combat.”

“But that’s not enough for me to keep up with professional mages or warriors in labyrinths. I have to admit, I’m a little jealous of you all.”

Nick turned away and scratched his cheek in embarrassment.

“Hmm-hmm, that feeling is unnecessary when you use my Union ability,” Bond boasted.

“That’s your ability, not mine. It’s as much the strength of the person I fuse with, too,” Nick protested.

“That is correct. And the strength of a team is dependent on the strength of its leader,” Bond said.

“I suppose so,” Nick responded, still looking unsatisfied.

“In other words, you wish you had the strength to fight in labyrinths without having to rely on others. Is that right?” Zem asked.

“Well, it’s not just labyrinths...”

“Go on.”

“I don’t know... I’ve just been feeling kinda useless in general. I

wish I had more skills.”

The others fell silent at Nick’s words. They all looked a little annoyed.

“D-did I say something weird?” Nick asked, flustered.

“You idiot,” Tiana said.

“Dummy,” Karan added.

“You can be quite dense,” Zem said.

“You’re hopeless,” Bond agreed.

“Hey, what the hell?!” Nick shouted, rattled by the sudden barrage of insults. Tiana shrugged exaggeratedly.

“Not to brag, but I’m pretty amazing. There aren’t many people who can use lightning magic at my age,” she said, spinning and flipping her hair. Even pompous gestures like that seemed to suit her.

“I’m amazed you can say stuff like that with a straight face,” Nick said.

“Shut up. Anyway, we’re all remarkably skilled in this party. That includes you, Nick,” Tiana insisted.

“I know that,” Nick said.

“You think you do, but you don’t,” Karan interjected, pointing at him. “We may all be strong, but that doesn’t prevent us from suffering embarrassing losses. We all had our lives turned upside down. No matter how amazing a person is, they are weak alone.”

“I was in a wretched state. There were moments when I wanted to die. But you were the one who showed me the way forward after I hit rock bottom, Nick,” Zem said.

There was no hint of shame, nor a death wish, on Karan’s and Zem’s faces as they spoke. Instead, they were looking at Nick kindly.

“Nick. You are anything but weak. You are simply still growing into your full potential. We just discovered your potential with magic. I would not be surprised if some small impetus accelerates your growth and soon, you’ll easily surpass the rest of us and obtain the strength to match the very best A-rank adventurers,” Zem continued.

“That’d be nice,” Nick said.

“If that day ever comes, please do not get it in your head that you can do everything yourself. We cannot know what the future holds, so I will not tell you to depend on us, but...” Zem trailed off.

The gaudy pink light of the magic lamps illuminated Nick’s face. The strangely refreshing color resembled the sun in its last moments before setting.

“I want you to remain aware of the frailness of humanity,” Zem finished, voicing what they all wanted to say to him.

Nick liked to show off. That was the nature of adventurers. Everyone in the profession desired to go on impressive adventures, brag about their exploits, and give rousing speeches to draw attention

to themselves and receive praise. Nick's party members had a penchant for the dramatic as well, as they just demonstrated in their efforts to encourage him. It was embarrassing to be on the receiving end of that kind of lecture for a change, but it made him happy as well.

"Trust me, I'm well aware of that... And I'll try not to forget," he said, turning around as he blushed and tried to hold back a smile. His party members looked satisfied. "But Zem, you're hardly one to talk. You have a habit of trying to do too much, like when the Steppingman attacked you last night. You need to think of your own safety."

"I can't argue with that. I was hesitant about the idea of running away," Zem responded with a wry smile.

The Survivors resumed their trek through the labyrinthine complex.

"Hey, wait! Our destination is near. Proceed with caution!" Bond warned.

"Then help us stay outta trouble," Nick responded.

"Geez, is that any way to treat your sword...?" Bond grumbled.

The party followed Bond down a winding path and found a shabby sign leaning against a wall.

"So the Bedchamber is through here," Nick said after reading the sign.

The place looked like a giant insect's nest created out of building materials. There were holes in the brick walls, and wooden boards, sheet metal, and steel frames had been used to board up passageways. Strange drawings and poetry covered the ceiling, walls, and floor, making it easy to lose one's sense of up and down. It would not be hard for anyone familiar with this place to hide and never be found.

There were a few guards around, but most people seemed to be engaging in sexual relations and paying the world around them no mind, giving the Bedchamber a dirty, humid feel. The men and women making love were a nuisance, but interrupting them would draw too much attention to the party. Word would reach Hale fast if anyone learned there were bounty hunters present. It was likely that many here were loyal to him.

That said, they stood little chance of warning Hale before the Survivors found him, thanks to Bond's superior senses as an ancient holy sword. Nick was also able to soundlessly incapacitate any guards they couldn't avoid. He was still excited about being able to show off his skills, but he remained focused and kept his guard up.

"This is going smoothly," Nick said.

"It certainly is," Bond agreed.

"Y-yep," Karan said.

“Y-yeah, we’re killing it!” Tiana exclaimed.

Zem remained silent. Unlike Nick, who was in a great mood, the former priest had been growing slowly more irritated, creating an awkward atmosphere within the group. His mood had grown worse with every step, and his expression was now full of anger. No one had been brave enough to speak to him. Tiana and Karan looked at Nick, urging him to say something.

“Hey, Zem. Uh...,” he began.

“What is it?” Zem asked.

“Are you upset about something? Did I say something to anger you earlier?”

“Oh, my apologies. My displeasure must have shown on my face.”

Zem rubbed his forehead in embarrassment as if to confirm his expression.

“Is this about the guards I’ve been knocking out?” Nick asked.

He had incapacitated many guards on their trek through the Garbage Heap. They had all looked ragged and pale, proving how the harmful drugs and illnesses were causing havoc in the place.

“Not exactly. It is their environment that I find upsetting. It is unsanitary and dangerous. It’s possible that an infectious disease is spreading through the population,” Zem responded.

“What?”

“I doubt you will catch it from breathing, but try not to touch any vomit or blood. I will disinfect your hands later. Avoid touching any mouths or chins as well.”

“Got it.”

“I am struck by how dreadful this place is. The people here don’t have a shred of hope in their lives.”

“Yeah... That’s the Garbage Heap for you.”

“It is perfectly normal for public order to suffer in places that the rulers of a territory neglect. That is usually when sanctuaries step in and provide aid, but I have never once heard the priests of Labyrinth City mention this place. It seems they would rather pretend it does not exist.”

Zem sighed gloomily, which seemed to ease the awkward tension his mood had created. The others looked at him cheerfully.

“Wh-what is it?” Zem asked.

“It’s just that... You’re more priestly than most priests. You just can’t help but worry about others,” Nick said.

“And yet I was excommunicated.”

“Who cares about that? I much prefer a person who’s willing to barge into a place like this over those priests who don’t wanna get their hands dirty.”

“Are you flirting with me, Nick?”

Tiana burst out laughing. "Ah-ha-ha! I'd pay good money to see that!"

"Gimme a break. I'm already getting weird looks from the employees at Anemone Alehouse," Nick protested.

"Hey, just be nice to them. Do you have a favorite?" Tiana asked.

"Well, I'm curious about Redd's history...", Nick answered.

"Are they your type, Nick?" Karan inquired.

"No, I didn't mean it like that. They're just shrouded in mystery. How did a lawyer come to work at a bar?" Nick said.

"But why does it matter? One should have the freedom to choose their job," Bond remarked.

"That's true, but..." Nick started to argue, but Bond put a finger to his mouth and silenced him.

"This is it. Quit chatting and focus on the job at hand."

"Oh, did you find him?" Nick asked. They had certainly done enough walking by now to come upon him.

"Yes, but..."

"Huh? Is there a problem?"

Bond hesitated to answer, looking slightly uncomfortable.

"Capturing him will be easy, but... Well..."

"Spit it out."

"He's...in the middle of something."

"Yeah? In the middle of what?"

"Don't make me say it!" Bond shouted, blushing. The other four sighed as they realized what he meant. Hale was a known womanizer, and this was clearly a pleasure quarter. They should've expected this.

"Well, if that's true...", Nick said with a wicked smile. "We couldn't ask for a better chance."

""""Are we really...?"""" the other four groaned.

They captured Hale almost instantly.

"What the hell is wrong with you all?! We were just gettin' it on!" Hale yelled.

"Blame yourself for letting your guard down when you have a bounty on your head," Nick responded.

Infiltrating the space, which looked like a single room at a cheap inn, and seizing Hale and the woman he was with could not have been easier. Bond used Parallel to block the escape routes, Tiana hit him with a spell, and Nick, Karan, and Zem quickly grabbed them.

"That did feel quite underhanded...", Bond said, looking uncomfortable.

"It was the safest way," Nick said, not looking the least bit guilty. "Humans are more dangerous than most monsters. They have dexterous arms and legs, they're intelligent, and some can even use

magic. Even those who look weak won't hesitate to fight back."

"You're right about that...", Karan said with a knowing nod. The other Survivors wore similar expressions. They were all fully aware of the dangers of mankind.

"But man... This guy's gonna net us three hundred thousand dina, huh?" Nick muttered. The woman who had been lying with Hale opened her eyes wide in astonishment.

"Are you serious, Hale?! You didn't tell me there was a bounty on you! What did you do?!" she shouted.

"Sh-shut up! I'm hardly the only one! Wait, did you say three hundred thousand?! That's way too high!" Hale yelled angrily.

"You're accused of fraud, slave-trading, and murder. The amount's too low, if anything. It could've easily been higher," Nick said, counting off the man's charges with his fingers.

"M-murder?! I haven't killed anyone!"

"Tell that to the guild."

"I-it's the truth! I've beaten and sold people, but I've never killed!"

"Well, there's no doubt about the other charges." Hale had essentially just confessed to everything except for the suspicion of murder. Nick tied him up with rope, figuring there was no longer any reason to go easy on him. "Regardless, you're coming with us."

"Let me go! Please! I can give you all the money you'd ever want!"

This guy doesn't know when to quit, Nick thought, getting tired of hearing the man's voice. He was considering gagging him with a cloth when the door opened with a *bang*.

"What do you think you're doing with my patients?!" a bald, stern-looking man yelled angrily as he entered the room.

His cassock made him look completely out of place. Its dark blue color meant that he belonged to a different sect from Zem. But he shared one thing in common with Zem—he lacked the emblem that priests wore around their necks. That was proof he had also been excommunicated.

"Who are you all? You don't look like amateurs," the man asked.

"And you're no normal priest," Nick responded.

The most striking thing about the excommunicated priest was his shockingly large biceps. His upper arms and the nape of his neck visible from the edges of his cassock looked hard as steel.

This is bad, Nick thought as a chill ran down his spine. The man sensed Nick's hesitation and closed the distance between them with one big step. Nick didn't know if it was because of magic or martial arts training, but he was alarmingly fast. His strength was likely on par with advanced adventurers.

"Ngh...!"

Karan was the first to respond, abandoning all thought of attacking and instead using her Dragonbone Sword as a shield to protect the party. The man struck the sword with his palm, his hand clinging to the blade. Both sides stayed still, understanding the danger of the situation. If he was as skilled as he looked, he would be able to use his mana or body to inflict a lethal wound on Karan, but her party members would not take kindly to that. Nick intended to stab a knife into his chest the moment that happened. A chilling silence fell between them.

“What territory are you from? The Bedchamber is a neutral zone. There is also an agreement to not interfere with my treatment,” the bald man said.

“Hold on. We don’t live here. We’re here for a bounty,” Nick responded. He glanced at Hale, who looked away awkwardly.

“What did Hale do?”

“Just about everything other than murder, by the sound of it. He’s certainly guilty of fraud and slave-trading. He has a bounty on his head for a reason.”

“...What a fool,” the man spat, standing down. Relief washed over the Survivors. They all sensed that fighting him would lead to serious injuries, even if they ended up winning. “My apologies. I misunderstood the situation. There have been many feuds recently.”

“Help me, Father Nargava!” Hale pleaded.

“I can heal injuries and illnesses, but I cannot clear your record of criminal charges. I will not defend a person with a bounty on their head, either. If anything happened to me, my other patients would kill you for it,” the bald man responded.

“Dammit!”

“You also broke your promise. I told you not to sleep with any women.”

“She made the first move... I couldn’t say no!”

The name “Nargava” rang a bell. The gatekeeper at the entrance to the Garbage Heap had warned the Survivors to not interfere with his work.

“Uh, are you gonna let us have him?” Nick asked.

“I have no reason to stand in your way. It sounds like he has truly done wrong. Nearly everyone here is guilty of something, and if it is his time to answer for what he has done, then so be it,” Nargava said, sounding bored. “However, he is my patient. If he is not returning anytime soon, let me at least treat him one last time.”

“Huh...? What are you treating him for?” Nick asked.

“Yellow demon fever. Have you been coughing, Hale? Any nausea?”

Zem grimaced at Nargava’s words. A few days prior, Nick had

mentioned that infectious disease to scare the children outside of Gooley Waterworks. Yellow demon fever spread through droplets of saliva and mucus, which made it especially easy to catch within homes, in the red-light district, and in unsanitary places like the Garbage Heap. The symptoms included yellow discoloration of the eyes and blurry vision, and it felt like a bad, lingering cold. While it wasn't life-threatening for a healthy adult, it was a dangerous disease for children and the elderly. Zem had treated it many times and knew it had to be taken seriously.

"You're sick, Hale?! What is wrong with you?!" the woman exclaimed.

"Oh, can it! I probably got it from you!" Hale yelled back.

"No way! Don't you dare blame me!" she shouted, near tears. Hale sighed in annoyance.

Each of the Survivors twisted their faces in anger, creating a thick tension in the room.

"Calm down. This is how the people here are. You're free to hand him over to the guild if you're after the reward money. I am going to treat the woman," Nargava said, sidestepping their anger. "I am giving you both medicine. Take it as soon as you feel chills."

"Won't you save me, Father?" Hale begged.

"Give it up. I already said I won't stand in their way," Nargava answered, even as he gave the man a thorough health inspection. "Given his young age, his condition should not get much worse. You can have him." He then passed Hale over to the Survivors.

"Are you really okay with this?" Nick asked.

"Okay with what?"

"Well... There's not much point to treating him if we're just gonna take him away."

Nargava laughed in response. "That's—"

"You are wrong, Nick," Zem interjected. "We cannot know if treating him will be pointless. Worst case, he may receive the death penalty if he gets charged with worse crimes. He could also die in a fight with other prisoners in jail."

"H-hey, don't say that!" Hale shouted, but Zem ignored him.

"But there is also the chance he will survive. He could be released if it is judged that he was falsely accused, or he could live a peaceful life in jail. If the king suddenly dies, his successor could issue a mass pardon for all prisoners. To speak in more extreme terms, all people will die eventually. Does that mean all medical treatment is pointless? I do not want to think that way."

"Oh, I understand," Nick said, impressed.

Nargava looked at Zem with great interest. "Are you a priest, too, young man?"

"I was excommunicated," Zem responded.

"As was I. I belonged to the Sanctuary of Lowell."

"Really... Sanctuary of Lowell?" Zem repeated with surprise. He quickly smoothed over his expression to avoid seeming rude. "Why are you treating people here?"

"Because I grew weary of the outside world. What about you? Why are you bounty hunting?"

"I am no longer working as a priest. I am an adventurer."

"I guess that is also fine."

"Do you want to return to your sanctuary?"

"Hmm... A part of me does, but it would be too much trouble. Regardless, I am too old to change my way of life. I'll be performing these priestly duties forever, excommunicated or not."

"I have had enough of that life, personally. I would much rather focus on enjoying my days."

"I'm jealous. As much as I would like to do the same, that is not an option for me."

"Is that why you are working here? I would think there is great demand for a priest who can identify and treat yellow fever right away."

"I learned how to quickly identify it from working here. Would you like me to teach you how?"

"Surely that is not knowledge I could gain from a simple explanation."

"That is true. You need experience and intuition."

Their fatigue was palpable as they spoke. Nick simply watched them, having no desire to join their conversation.

"Oh, Master Nargava. I have a question for you," Bond said, cutting into the conversation.

"What is it?" Nargava responded.

"There have been many kidnappings in the city recently. The culprit seems to be targeting children. Would you happen to know anything about this?" Bond asked.

"Kidnappings? Hale, don't tell me..." Nargava glared at the man, who hurriedly shook his head.

"No, I haven't kidnapped anybody! I've hooked up women in debt with men who wanna have some fun, but I've never taken anyone against their will. I'm not capable of anything like that," he protested.

"Then do you know anything?" Bond pressed.

Hale cocked his head in thought. "I'll tell you if you untie the rope."

"Can we take that to mean you're involved with the kidnapper?" Nick threatened.

"For the last time, no! I'm not involved! Geez, have it your way..."

Hale relented and began to search through his memory. "Kidnapping, huh...? People go missing every day in the Garbage Heap. Most of them are just kids selling themselves off... Wait."

"Did you think of something?" Bond asked.

"I heard that a kid working at a bar near here went missing... The kidnapper could be someone who frequents this area."

"Do you have any idea as to their identity?"

"I dunno... There are some perverts here who like kids. But I don't see the point of abducting them by force in the poorest part of the city. You could just entice them with a little change instead."

"Hmm."

"Sometimes adventurers will get bored of brothels and look for men or women here. Just the other day, a reporter was enticing kids with candy."

"A reporter?"

"Yeah, a weird reporter's been sneaking in here recently looking for gossip to write about. I hear they're collecting dumb rumors that only kids know about."

"I see," Bond replied, looking satisfied. He thanked Hale and stepped back.

"Do you need anything else? I don't mind giving an exam if you don't feel well," Nargava offered.

"No, I am fine," Bond responded.

"Then take him away. No one is going to bother trying to save a person with a bounty on their head, but that doesn't mean the people around here are fond of bounty hunters. I'm also about to get busy."

"You are?"

"Yes. This place is quite dangerous. There is no end to the injuries —"

Nargava was interrupted when the door slammed open again, admitting a small crowd of men. Nick grabbed Hale's arms so he couldn't run, but the men lost interest in them after a glance. It was a rule in the Garbage Heap that bounty hunters could only attack their targets or anyone who attacked them first; as such, the men wisely ignored the Survivors to avoid trouble. Besides, it seemed like their business was with Nargava.

"Here you are, Father Nargava! Someone took a fire spell to the face. They need your help."

"You idiots! Carry them to my clinic right away! Bring water and a towel!"

"Hey Father, do you have any medicine? My bud has blue rust fever."

"That can wait. His condition will not deteriorate that quickly."

"My teeth hurt, Father!"

“How many times do I have to tell you all, teeth are outside my area of expertise! There’s a dentist at the water tower!”

“That dentist only treats young women!”

“Then go to one in the city! Just take a painkiller for now!”

The Survivors watched in open-mouthed amazement as the men pleaded for Nargava’s help. It looked like he was running a field hospital. They were only going to get in the way if they remained any longer.

“...Let’s go,” Nick said, sounding tired.

“Yeah,” Karan agreed with a serious face.

“Heh, back already?”

The first to speak to the Survivors when they returned to the Manhunt guild in the evening was the adventurer who had picked a fight with Tiana earlier. It was obvious from his smirk that he was greatly enjoying himself.

“Hey, uh...” Nick trailed off. *What was his name again?* He glanced at his party members discreetly, but they all shook their heads slightly. They didn’t seem to know, either.

“It appears even the mighty Survivors didn’t stand a chance in the Garbage Heap. I can give you all a much-needed lesson if you like,” the man taunted.

“Uh, we’re good,” Nick responded.

“Acting tough, huh? We can’t declare the bet over yet, but Hale’s a clever bastard. He’ll probably escape while you’re here dawdling. Not even the seasoned vets here have been able to catch him.”

Nick and the others stared at him awkwardly. They wanted to argue but were too busy trying to remember his name. Unable to watch any longer, Hale interjected.

“His name is Ash. He frequents the Garbage Heap. He’s loud and annoying, and unpopular with women.”

“Wh-who are you?!” Ash shouted.

“I’m Hale. Tch...” Hale clicked his tongue.

Ash’s jaw dropped in shock. Other adventurers in the guild seemed to doubt it was actually him. A guild employee came over to confirm his identity. They asked him some questions, compared his face to their sketch, and led him to a back room. That could only mean one thing—they had confirmed the man to be Hale.

“Well, that’s that. You guys actually caught him in one day. Impressive,” the deerian receptionist praised.

“Oh, you think so? And here I was afraid you would criticize us for taking too long,” Tiana responded with a bold smile.

“Yeah, yeah. You win,” the receptionist said with a shrug. The other adventurers were stunned.

“Now then...” Tiana turned around and scanned the faces in the guild. “Which one of you was the bookmaker... Oh, there you are.” She grinned viciously when her eyes settled on an adventurer.

“Eek...,” the man whimpered, spilling his wine on his shirt. He seemed frozen in place as he trembled and guarded the bag full of money. He withered under Tiana’s intimidating aura.

“It was you, wasn’t it? What are our earnings?”

“I—I didn’t think you would catch him this fast. I’ll do the calculations...”

“How much money did you collect?”

“Well, a lot of people continued to bet after you left. It’s a little under eight hundred thousand dina.”

“That’ll do.”

Without waiting for permission, Tiana seized the bag and an open bottle of wine. She then dropped the bag on the bar counter next to reception with a loud thud and chugged the bottle.

“W-wait, there are other people who won the bet, too, so...,” the man protested.

“I’m using this to buy all the alcohol you have! Free drinks for everyone!” Tiana declared.

A confused silence enveloped the guild. That confusion quickly gave way to understanding and approval, then joyful cheers.

“That’s what I’m talking about! You’re not half bad, girl!”

“Whoo-hoo! Free drinks!”

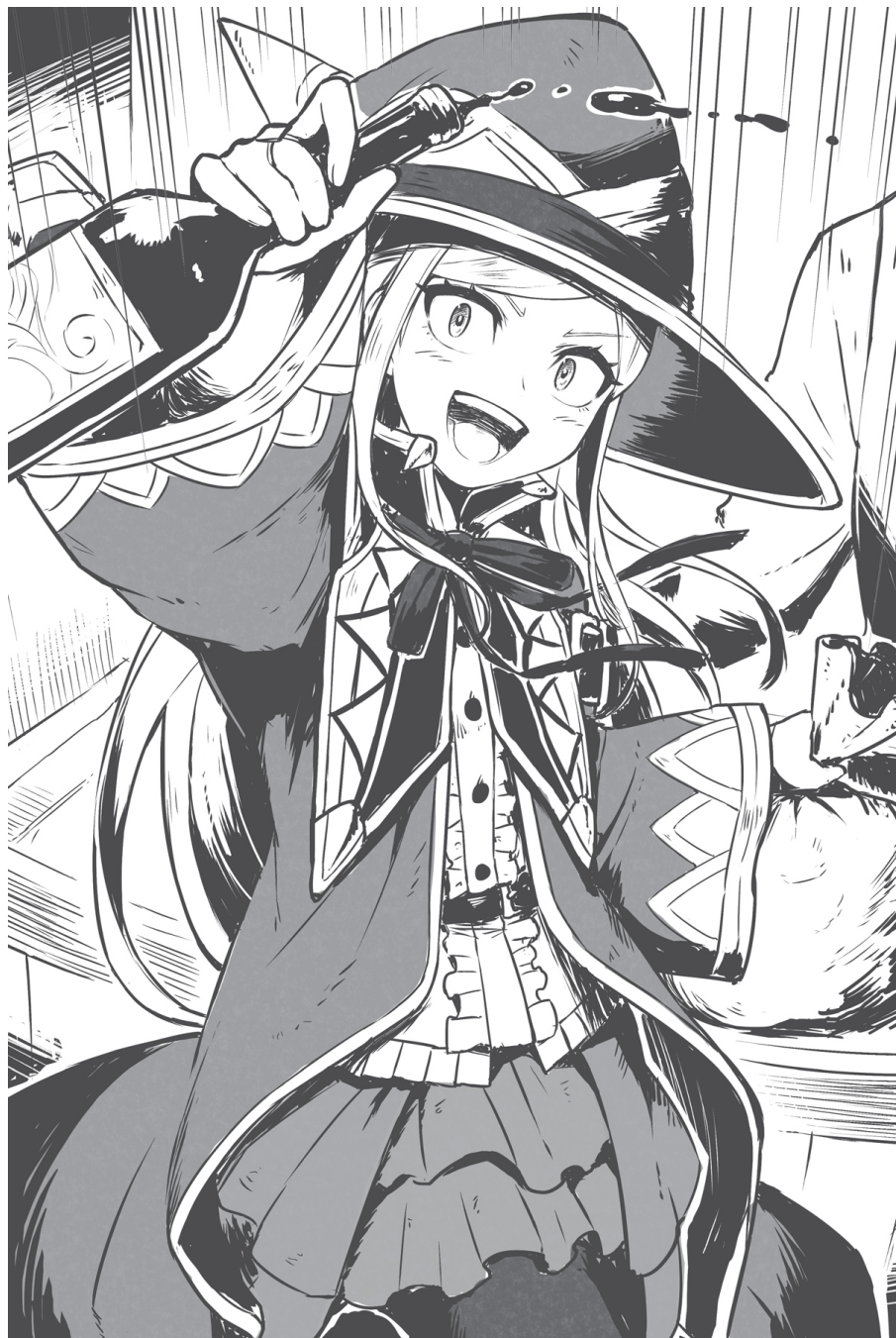
“Hey, I bet on you guys! I want my money!”

“Oh, be real. You would’ve spent it all on alcohol anyway. Or are you unwilling to drink because it’s my treat?” Tiana said.

She had won over the entire guild in one stroke. Both those who had lost the bet and those who had won but wouldn’t be getting their earnings back looked satisfied. The Survivors could have easily become the target of scorn or jealousy among the adventurers of the Manhunt guild, but Tiana had just helped their party get into everyone’s good graces. Nick was amazed at how well she handled the situation. She was just as charismatic as Zem, but in a totally different way.

Despite his admiration for what Tiana had done, however, one thing bothered him. “You and Bond are the ones who deserve most of the credit for catching Hale,” he muttered to Zem. The former priest chuckled.

“Eh, I do not mind. This will make our job easier in the future,” Zem responded.



"If you say so."

Nick sighed, and Bond and Karan patted him on the shoulders.

"Good work, leader," Karan said.

"It must be hard looking after these unruly kids," Bond said.

"I don't wanna hear that from you," Nick clapped back, and the two laughed.

The Survivors went back to the Manhunt guild the next day and were met with astonishment from the deerian receptionist.

"Wow, you guys sure keep busy. It hasn't even been a day since you caught Hale. I appreciate the hard work, I guess," she said.

"We'll take the compliment," Nick responded.

"But man, last night was a nightmare... You don't know how long it took to kick out all the drunks," the receptionist complained.

"Whoops. My apologies," Tiana said, not sounding sorry at all. The receptionist was well-acquainted with the nature of adventurers, however, and didn't criticize them further. People were already beginning to see them as members of this guild. Compared to when they first arrived, the other adventurers' gazes now showed affection and reverence.

"Hey, it's the Survivors. Those guys are dedicated."

"I wonder how they caught Hale... They must be really skilled."

"Lady Tiana! Let me know if you ever need a new party!"

"Who are you calling 'Lady'?!" Tiana snapped, unsure if she was being made fun of or not. The man who called out to her roared with laughter.

"Tiana, save it for after work... Anyway, can we have the reward we didn't collect yesterday?" Nick asked.

The receptionist shrugged and handed him a bag of gold coins. "Here you go. Don't waste it like last time."

"We wouldn't do that with reward money... Right?" Nick responded, looking uneasily at Tiana.

"Of course not!" Tiana shouted.

"Good. There's something we wanted to check, too," Nick said.

"The Steppingman, right? I'll get the files." The receptionist pulled a heavy binder off a shelf behind the desk and plopped it down in front of the party. The musty-smelling binder kicked up dust into the air, causing Karan to wrinkle her nose. "Let's see... Oh, the bounty's gone up. It's at one million dina. Looks like some weirdo added to the reward total recently."

"Who was it?" Nick asked.

"A pawnshop owner on Blacksmith Street. It says here the Steppingman robbed him. Can't tell you if that's true or not, though,"

she answered, snickering.

“Is the Steppingman actually out there?” Nick wondered aloud.

“Who knows,” the receptionist replied, clearly not taking this seriously.

Nick ignored her and started flipping through the binder. The pages listed the reward and attempts at the bounty, and contained accounts describing the Steppingman, but there was very little in the way of useful information. Most of the reports sounded like they were describing a sprite out of folklore, making claims like “the Steppingman will open a hole in the roof but fix your gutter,” and “you can ward them away from your house with smoke from burning wood.” The people who had added to the reward were all urban legend enthusiasts who were just having some fun. They didn’t actually expect anyone to catch the Steppingman.

However, Nick and Zem did spot a few comments among the pages that seemed legitimate. One person claimed “they used some kind of tool to conceal themselves,” another said they believed “they are not a monster or a spirit, but simply a nimble human,” yet another stated “there have been multiple kidnappings” and that “the Steppingman’s objective is unclear.” Those were all consistent with the Steppingman that they had seen.

“Are you sure you don’t wanna go after a more normal target?” the receptionist asked.

“I guess we can take on some ordinary ones when we have time,” Nick responded.

“Please do.”

“Okay. But I’m telling you, we’re not doing this for fun. It’s not the Steppingman we’re trying to catch, but a kidnapper who’s imitating the Steppingman. Does that ring any bells?”

“A kidnapper, huh? You’re gonna have to perform your own investigation... Oh.”

“Did you think of something?”

“Well, they’re probably not one, but there has been a suspicious person talking to a bunch of kids. She’s right over there,” the receptionist said, pointing languidly at a table.

There were three people at the table: a woman wearing baggy, unfashionable clothes, a plainly dressed yet pretty girl, and a beautiful woman in a stylish suit. The unfashionably dressed woman was questioning the other two enthusiastically.

“I see! If you eat udon in front of the fox statue behind the abandoned temple, you get cursed!”

“Exactly! A really jealous fox spirit will attack your family. I’ve heard that some women trigger the curse on purpose to get rid of a bad husband!” the girl exclaimed.

“That’s fascinating! It’s a temple for cutting off ties! Do you know any more?!” the poorly dressed woman asked.

“Have you heard the rumor that one of the most famous idols right now isn’t actually human?” the one in the suit asked.

Nick knew all three of them. The young girl was Reina. The person in the suit he thought was a woman was the lawyer, Redd. And the shabbily dressed woman was Olivia, the magazine reporter who frequented the Adventurers Guild branches. They last saw her getting told off by Vilma.

“What’re they doing...?” Nick said.

“That Olivia girl is driving me crazy. She’s been talking to other adventurers like that, too,” the receptionist complained.

“Nick. Do you remember what Hale said? That there is a person enticing children with candy?” Zem asked.

“I just remembered that, too, but...” Nick trailed off. They both looked troubled. “I don’t want to suspect her as the Steppingman... Oh, what am I saying? There’s no way.”

“I agree. I just thought I should mention that.”

“If only I could recall the person’s appearance more clearly... I remember that they fought with chains and were ridiculously agile.”

“They used chains as a weapon?” Karan asked suddenly.

“Yeah, they hid it in their sleeves and used them like whips. They also wrapped them around their arms and body underneath their clothes for defense. I think the chains must’ve been some magic item because they had total control over them,” Nick answered.

“Hmm...” Karan crossed her arms and looked at Olivia suspiciously.

“Is something bothering you?” Nick inquired.

“She was weirdly heavy when I tried to push her away the other day. She felt like a boulder.”

“A boulder? That doesn’t make any sense. She’s short, and even with a little extra weight she shouldn’t be heavy at all.”

“Her abdomen felt firm, as if she practiced martial arts like you... But I also thought there might have been heavy chains wrapped around her body.”

Karan’s words put Nick on high alert. Suddenly, the impossible seemed possible. “Karan. Tiana. Block the entrance,” he said.

“Huh? Are you going to arrest her?” Tiana asked, surprised.

“It’s just a precaution. I’m gonna give it to her straight. If we’re right, she could get violent and run.”

“Okay,” Karan responded.

The two walked through the crowded guild to the door, and Zem and Bond took positions behind Nick. Once they were all ready, Nick walked up to Olivia’s table. He tried to keep his expression calm as he

addressed them.

“Hey, what’re you guys doing here?” he asked.

“Hey Nick!” Reina responded.

“Why, we came to see you all. This woman grabbed us when we walked in,” Redd explained.

“Hey! We met at Fishermen! It’s nice to see you again!” Olivia said with an innocent smile.

Nick couldn’t see the person in front of him as the Steppingman, but then again, that could have been by the Steppingman’s design. They were likely a master of deception.

“You said you would give us a reward if we agreed to do an interview. Could you spare a copy of the latest edition of *Lemuria*?” Bond asked excitedly, joining the table and sitting down between Olivia and Reina. Zem took position to protect Redd. The lawyer quickly gave him a seat, seeming to sense something was up.

“Ah-ha-ha, I can give you as many extra back issues as you want. But I don’t carry them around while collecting data, silly. I’ll have to go back to the office,” Olivia said.

“You sure are busy. Do you often work in this part of the city?” Nick asked.

“I’d like to ask around in the safer parts, but it’s difficult to get people to open up...”

“Where were you two nights ago?”

“Huh? Two nights ago? Hmm... If I recall correctly, I was cutting it close with the deadline for my manuscript. I went to a printing shop, returned to the office, then to a bar for dinner afterward.”

“Where was the bar?”

“Uh... Let me think...”

“Isn’t this area a little dangerous for a woman to walk alone at night?”

“Ha, I may not look it, but I’m an adventurer. I’m pretty strong, you know. Hah! Pow!”

Olivia punched the air jokingly. It was an exaggerated gesture, like one you might see from a comedian. Yet the punch sent a chill down Nick’s spine.

“Weirdo,” he said.

“Huh?!” Olivia responded.

Olivia’s punch was unnatural, and excessively so. Normally, when a person moved their upper body, they naturally moved their hips, knees, and heels along with it. Whether you used a sword or your fists, fighting without any wasted movement was an advanced skill.

The reason Olivia’s punch was so bizarre was because it consisted of *nothing but* wasted movement. Nick’s intuition told him just how difficult that was. Similar to how it’s impossible for a person with no

training to move without wasted movement, it was similarly impossible to do the opposite. All people naturally used their muscles in their daily life and grew accustomed to it. Moving your muscles in a completely unnatural manner required full control of them.

“Wh-why are you interrogating me like this? You’re making me uncomfortable... I guess I have no right to say that as a reporter, but still,” Olivia complained, looking at Nick innocently. Nick sighed deeply.

“Yeah, sorry for asking such roundabout questions. That was kinda rude.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll quit beating around the bush. Are you the Steppingman?”

“Wha...?”

“Where are the kids you’ve kidnapped? Why are you abducting them? And who the hell are you anyway? Where did you gain that kind of skill?”

Nick took a step closer to Olivia as he spoke. He was close enough to feel her breath. The surrounding adventurers began to notice that something was going on, and Bond took the chance to usher Reina and Redd behind him.

“Umm... I’m really not sure what you’re talking about...”

“Look me in the eyes as you say that,” Nick demanded.

“D-didn’t you say you’d stop interrogating me?” Olivia frantically avoided his gaze. She even broke into a cold sweat, a clear sign she was hiding something.

“Whoa, is there some trouble here? What did you do this time, Olivia?”

“Are you botherin’ people for your weird articles again?”

The Manhunt adventurers began to poke fun, but the air between Nick and Olivia was heavy. The adventurers gradually realized that something was amiss.

“U-umm...,” Olivia stuttered.

“Spit it out,” Nick pressed.

“I just remembered I left the lights on at the office. If you’ll excuse me,” Olivia said, a moment before breaking the table in two with a kick. From beneath her baggy overcoat, she lifted her leg, and like a sword, swung it down with such speed and force that her kick was closer to a slash than to a dull blow.

“What the hell?!” Nick shouted.

Olivia kicked one of the fragments of the table at Nick and used that momentum to jump up to the ceiling of the guild. She then kicked off the ceiling to soar for the exit at a sharp angle and escaped. The guild erupted with the sounds of broken bottles and angry yells.

“What the hell was that?!”

“You goddamn idiot!”

“Hey!”

It had all happened so fast. The adventurers stared at the door Olivia had escaped through, stunned by what they had just witnessed.

“Survivors. Come back here, now.”

Nick turned toward the voice and saw the deerian receptionist quivering with anger.

“We got yelled at because of you!” Tiana complained angrily as she sat down on a sofa in Anemone Alehouse.

“Sorry... I didn’t see that coming at all,” Nick said, sounding truly apologetic.

After the Survivors let Olivia escape, the receptionist called them to an office in the guild and scolded them. Fortunately, they were released quickly, as Olivia was the one who actually broke the table and ran away.

“Do you think she’s the Steppingman?” Tiana asked.

“I don’t know... She might have just made a run for it because she knows something,” Nick said, putting a hand to his chin in thought.

“Olivia gave you a business card, did she not? Why not try going to that address?” Bond suggested.

Nick shook his head. “The guild is already sending a search party made up of A- and B-rank adventurers. There wouldn’t be much point in inspecting it ourselves.”

The receptionist said guild management was searching for Olivia, who was clearly significantly more skilled than her eccentric persona would have one believe. It seemed like the real reason the guild released the Survivors so quickly was because they were too busy preparing for that.

“So what should we do? Just watch from afar?” Bond asked.

“We’re gonna continue our own investigation. I’m not backing down just because some advanced adventurers are now on the job. That sound good?” Nick said. The others nodded resolutely.

“Are you done talking?” Redd inquired with a smile, apparently waiting for them to finish.

“Yeah. Sorry for putting you two through that after you came to get us.”

“Trust me, you get used to that kind of trouble when you work around here. I should’ve known better than to bring the girl along,” Redd responded.

“I was shocked... I couldn’t believe she escaped from a guild full of adventurers,” Zem said.

“That was strange. She was insanely quick,” Nick agreed.

Nick had studied under Argus, who was among the strongest in

Labyrinth City when it came to fighting without magic. The experience gave him an eye for appraising swordplay and martial arts, yet even to him, Olivia's skill seemed special. She displayed an ability one could only obtain with decades of training, but her appearance and occupation were incongruous with that.

"Oh, yes. I had something I wanted to talk to you about, Redd," Zem said.

"Huh? What is it, Zem?"

"We met a patient with yellow demon fever in the Garbage Heap."

"Seriously?!" Redd exclaimed in their natural voice. It was shockingly deep compared to the way they normally spoke. Nick imagined speaking at a higher pitch must take consistent effort. "Oh, how embarrassing. Ahh, ahh... So was there really a person with yellow demon fever?"

"Yes. There is an outbreak in an illegal brothel."

"Oh my. We have to be careful. Did you all hear that?! Wash your hands when you come in and out of the bar!" Redd shouted, and the employees responded affirmatively. Zem appeared confused.

"Huh? Has the illness not reached this district?" he asked.

"Not that I know of. Yellow demon fever outbreaks can get out of control quickly, so I imagine everyone is being careful. I would definitely hear about it if an employee got sick. Hiding the illness of an employee is a serious offense. The sanctions will put a bar out of business."

"Wow, that is quite strict."

"On the flip side, employees typically receive support if they notify their bar of their illness. Most establishments have a reserve fund everyone contributes to that is used to pay for medical treatment. That practice has been around ever since an outbreak that happened long ago."

"I see..., " Zem responded, impressed.

"Anyway, thanks for telling me. Shall we move on to why I brought you here?" Redd asked before beckoning over a blond woman who was sitting at the counter. The reason Redd and Reina had gone to Manhunt was to introduce the Survivors to someone.

"You guys are the Survivors, huh?" the woman asked after limping over with a crutch. She was casually dressed in a black tank top and capri pants. Her right leg was injured—hence the crutch—but it hardly seemed to slow her at all. By her demeanor alone, you would have never known she was hurt.

"Are you Ada?" Nick asked before she could introduce herself.

"Oh, you know me?"

"I've seen you at Pioneers. You're Sommelier Ada, the light warrior from the Grand Chefs."

“Now that name’s a blast from the past. I was never too fond of it, though. The only reason I was called that is ’cause I have a good nose. Lately I’ve just been ‘Ada the Drunk.’”

“You can’t drink all day long while working as a bouncer at a bar, darling. You need to take your job seriously,” Redd chastised. They seemed well-acquainted.

“Quiet, you. I’m a good bouncer. This is only gonna harm my reputation even more,” Ada said, flaunting her injury.

If what Reina had told the party was true, Ada’s self-confidence was not misplaced. She had to be extremely skilled to face the Steppingman alone and survive with only a leg injury. Judging by appearances, however, she looked like the unruly drunk Zem and Redd had described.

“I’m telling you to clean up and show other people that you take your job seriously. Help me out, Nick,” Redd said.

“You can’t always judge adventurers by their appearance. There are some drunks who are really skilled, or even brave enough to eat a peach worth twenty million dina,” Nick responded teasingly, earning a smile out of Ada.

“You’re a good judge of talent, even if that mouth of yours will get you into trouble. My best days are far behind me now. I only ate a slice of the peach, by the way. That was five million dina, at most.” She reached out for a handshake, and Nick gladly obliged.

“I’m Nick of the Survivors.”

“All right, let’s get the stuffy crap outta the way.”

“What’re you talking about?”

Ada let go of his hand and plopped down on the sofa. Nick followed suit and sat opposite of her.

“First, sorry for the trouble my daughter has caused you. It seems like she’s been putting herself in danger... Reina!” Ada said.

“M-Mama?”

“Apologize to these people.”

“Okay! I’m sorry!”

Despite her usual stubbornness, Reina listened to her mother without question and bowed. Nick was relieved, believing this meant she would stop following the party and Zem around. That relief was premature.

“Swear to me you won’t involve yourself with the Steppingman case anymore,” Ada said.

“No! I don’t wanna!” Reina shouted. Ada grimaced and continued.

“Wrong answer, kiddo. It’s too dangerous for you. It’s too dangerous for me, even. There are people in Labyrinth City you need to stay away from, and the Steppingman is one of them.”

“B-but my friends...!”

“We don’t know for sure if they’re going to die. Who knows, they could be having a good time wherever they are. There’s no guarantee they were all taken by the Steppingman.”

“Stop lying, Mama! You don’t believe that!”

“Just do as you’re told!”

Mother and child had begun to fight. Ada sighed and turned to Nick.

“Geez, where did she get that reckless attitude from... I wish she would aspire to have a normal job instead of lookin’ up to adventurers.”

“I don’t want to be like you! I want to help people, like Zem!”

“I am not a person to aspire after, either. I have my problems. Have you heard about me, Ada?” Zem asked.

“Yeah... Bits and pieces,” she responded vaguely. As a bouncer at a bar, she was sure to have heard the rumors of the excommunicated priest who had made a name for himself at hostess clubs.

“But I heard you’re nice to the women in the nightlife district!” Reina protested.

“That is no guarantee I am nice to anyone else. That includes children,” Zem said with a sigh that resembled Ada’s.

“Anyway, that’s it for the Steppingman case,” Ada said.

“Yeah. You should forget about it, Reina,” Nick agreed.

“That goes for you, too, Survivors.”

“Huh?”

“You should quit pursuing this case, too.”

Nick sensed her uneasiness.

“That’s totally uncalled for. The Steppingman bounty has been around for ages. Anyone has a right to go after them. It’s not like we’ll be snatching the hunt from you anyway, right?” Nick said, not hiding his irritation. Instead of an angry response, Ada smiled softly.

“I can’t catch them myself, unfortunately. I was lucky to survive and get away with only this injury. You fought the Steppingman. What do you think of them?” she asked.

Nick felt he had no choice but to answer honestly. He realized Ada was not picking a fight.

“At the very least, I don’t think they’re a skilled adventurer who has fallen on hard times. They must’ve trained at a more prestigious establishment...or a more dangerous one.”

“I agree. I don’t have proof, but I feel like they must be a professional assassin, or have training in some other dangerous, underground profession. I wouldn’t bat an eye if it turned out they’re part of an advance guard for the demons,” Ada said.

Nick nodded gravely. He was inclined to agree with Ada’s fears. Argus said something similar when Nick was in Combat Masters—that

there were dangerous people in Labyrinth City who you were better off not antagonizing, including S-rank adventurers and other more wicked types who matched their strength. You had to be prepared to die if you wanted to fight one of them.

"I couldn't bear to see the people who saved my daughter die. I'm saying this out of kindness. I'll give Reina a good scolding," Ada said.

"We're not pursuing the Steppingman 'cause Reina asked us to. We've taken on this job, and we intend to finish it. It'll be on no one but us if we end up dying," Nick responded. In other words, he didn't mind fighting over this. Argus had taught him that adventurers' custom well.

"Still..." Ada sighed and embraced Reina.

"H-huh? What's wrong, Mama?"

"The criminal is a pervert who's abducting little girls just like my Reina."

"There's no guarantee they're a man," Nick responded.

"And this guy over here nearly faints every time a little girl enters his vicinity," Ada continued, before flinging Reina toward Zem. He instinctively tried to catch the girl so she wouldn't get hurt, and her elbow hit the pit of his stomach. The combination of mental shock and physical pain sent him into a stupor.

"Ngh...", he moaned.

"What the hell was that for?!" Nick shouted.

"Do you really think you'll be able to catch the Steppingman when one of your team members is like this?" Ada asked, looking at Zem as he suffered.

"He can support us from the rear. He'll still be able to contribute," Tiana argued, breaking her silence. Ada shook her head.

"This lady's man is famous in the bars around here. Everyone knows he's into mature women and pisses himself around little girls. It took no effort at all for me to find that out, and you can bet the Steppingman already knows."

"Hmm..."

"There's only so much he can do to support you with such an obvious weakness. Do you really think he won't be caught off guard like this while going to rescue the very children he's so scared of? I was gentle with him just now. There are much more vicious ways his phobia could be used to torture him."

Nick knew she was right. Zem's weakness would be a serious burden in combat. Given how cunning the Steppingman was in their first encounter, he wouldn't be surprised if they used the children they kidnapped as a shield. And it would be a calculated part of their strategy, too, rather than as a last resort.

Even putting Zem's fear of children aside, they would be helpless

if they were forced to choose between catching the Steppingman or saving a child's life. As such, not only would Zem's phobia hamper them, their own lack of ruthlessness to abandon the children would also impede them.

"I know you're not fond of kids... You might even hate them. But would you risk your life for one?" Nick asked.

"I am not sure. But yes, I do hate them," Zem responded.

"Huh?" Reina appeared shocked. It seemed like she hadn't noticed how uncomfortable he was around her. Zem paid that no mind as he gently picked her up and set her down in a chair. He was trembling, but there was an intense fire in his eyes that made Nick gulp.

"No, that is not quite right... It is more that I find young, pretty girls scary," Zem explained.

"What do you mean?" Ada asked.

"Oh, have you not heard that part? I was imprisoned for raping a little girl. Ah—I was falsely accused. I suppose I should have led with that. I'll let you decide if you believe me or not."

Zem then began to tell Ada his story in a dispassionate voice. He told her that the girl who ruined his life looked a lot like Reina, and that she likely plotted his downfall with the help of some jealous priests because he spurned her love. He described his experience in the dark and cramped prison cell in detail, where he had no one to talk to beyond the guards who heckled him and occasionally forgot to feed him. No one among the many people he had helped as a priest came to save him; instead, they turned on him and even threw stones after he was released.

Ada was stunned by what she heard, causing her to lose the aggression she was displaying earlier. "So the reason you're afraid of little girls is because you were betrayed by one. What a terrible thing to go through..."

"No, her betrayal is not the source of my fear," Zem said. "I was stuck in that dark underground cell for months with no one to talk to. I would sometimes go an entire day without food or water. There was an especially difficult three-week period when I was not even allowed to speak to the guards. The loneliness grew so oppressive that I wanted to kiss the guards who would ridicule me and hit me with their sticks through the bars."

His tight smile seemed to reach the hearts of everyone in the bar. Someone audibly gulped.

"If Myril, the girl who betrayed me, appeared before me then, I probably would have prostrated myself, licked her shoes, and begged her to let me out, saying I would do anything she asked in return."

A bottomless darkness seemed to settle in Zem's eyes. As Reina peered into that darkness, she felt like she could see a cramped cell

containing a shabbily dressed man who hadn't been able to wash himself or cut his hair in some time. He was pleading fervently for someone to save him, saying that he would do anything they asked, but no one answered him. There were countless bystanders watching him and chuckling, taking delight in his pain. Hearing about his unimaginably difficult past had her near tears.

"The experience broke my spirit completely. The god I believed in, the virtue I was supposed to practice, the love that enriches the world, none of it mattered anymore. I would have done anything to survive. Every time I see a young and pretty girl, it reminds me of the fear and humiliation I felt in that prison cell. I feel an urge to beg her to speak to me. And an urge to hang myself. I see just how small I am. That is why I hate them," Zem concluded. Reina gave an audible "eek."

"Whoops. That was a bit intense, wasn't it?" Zem asked.

"Well, yeah... Go easy on the girl, okay?" Tiana said.

"That was a little immature of me." Zem gave a wry smile.

The bar's employees blushed, finding his smile alluring. The reason so many in the nightlife district were drawn to Zem was because of his ability to speak eloquently about a painful and humiliating experience that most people would keep hidden, and his willingness to accept others who had been through similar hardships. He was an excommunicated priest with a dark past and an endlessly kind heart, who was also terrified of little girls and projected an aura of danger that attracted people who knew how cruel the world could be.

"Despite all that, I loathe the idea of innocent people being forcibly imprisoned or abducted more. My heart aches knowing that other people could be suffering the same humiliation and pain that I did. Those abducted children may be the same as me. I want to relieve myself from the sympathy I feel for them."

Zem was like the star of an opera as he stole the eyes of everyone in the bar. No one else could say a word.

"That is why I want to catch the Steppingman. I will overcome whatever handicap I need to in order to achieve that. I did just fine when you tossed Reina at me, did I not?" he asked.

No, you were clearly just hiding your discomfort, Nick thought, but he didn't say anything.

"I do not think those who do wrong in society's dark corners are so different from me, either. I am sure most also went through an experience that broke their spirit. I cannot turn away from the misfortune and evil in this world. I am aware I can only do so much by myself, though."

"I can see there's no point in trying to discourage you. That's fine. But you're a bad influence on children. Try to stay away from my

Reina,” Ada said. She put on a motherly face and carried Reina out of the room before coming right back.

“You have your hands full with that one. I agree that I am a bad influence,” Zem said.

“Glad to hear it,” Ada responded with a sigh. “You guys are only gonna get stronger. All adventurers who reach the top have a few screws loose, and I sense that from you.”

“Should we take that as a compliment, Nick?” Zem asked.

“Don’t ask me,” Nick replied grumpily, eliciting a chuckle from the former priest. “Anyway, Ada. I can tell you’re worried we’re not strong enough for this. You were helpless on your own. That leaves us with two options going forward.”

Nick held up two fingers.

“Yeah?” Ada responded.

“First, if we decide we’re not strong enough to catch the Steppingman on our own, we can entrust the case to someone more capable like Fifs. Second—”

“We can work together,” Bond interrupted, speaking up for the first time. He looked proud of himself.

“You have a real habit of stealing all the cool lines, you ass,” Nick said.

“W-watch your tongue! I was just trying to save you the embarrassment of having to say that yourself!” Bond yelled, waving his arms angrily. Karan pulled him away from the table, and he protested loudly for her to let him go.

“Why do you think I would help you?” Ada asked.

“I think you only half meant it when you told us to withdraw. Lacking proper resolve can mean life or death with such a dangerous adventure like this. You were probably testing us.”

“You saw through me.”

“You bet. I can tell you’re a nice person.”

“Tch.” Ada clicked her tongue loudly, stood up, and tossed a stack of papers down onto the table.

“What are these?” Nick asked.

There were multiple maps of Labyrinth City with notes and arrows written on them. Nick realized their purpose as he studied them—they recorded locations where the Steppingman commonly appeared.

“Whoa... Are you okay with sharing this?” Nick asked.

The arrows indicated what direction the Steppingman had come from and where they had gone. The notes were Ada’s conjecture. It was all information Nick had been dying to obtain.



“I’m Sommelier Ada of the Grand Chefs. I like to drink, I have a good nose, and I’m good at hooking people up with the right adventures.”

Nick looked at Ada with respect. He felt like she was the first veteran adventurer he had met in a while who he could look up to.

“I thought about taking this to the Sun Knights, but the ones around here won’t take on any jobs unless you bribe them first. There’s not much of a reward for the abducted kids, either, ’cause they all come from poor families. And not only will this job not make you any money, the kidnapper is also extremely strong. It’s been hard getting anyone to care,” Ada said, shrugging her shoulders.

“Is that why you blamed the kidnappings on the Steppingman?” Nick asked.

“I thought I might be able to use the reward for the Steppingman to entice other adventurers into action. Then I just needed to decide if I could count on them.”

“So we’ve been dancing in the palm of your hand this whole time. Well played,” Tiana said, glaring at her.

“Come on, don’t put it that way. I’m counting on you, Survivors.”

Casting the Net



Eterna on Blacksmith Street was a restaurant known for its delicious barbecued eel. Gourmets often ordered it alongside a rolled omelet and rice wine. Its popularity kept it open until late at night, and today was no exception. It was pitch-black outside when the employees began to leave.

“Fwaah... I’m tired...”

A twelve-year-old girl named Fil was heading home after her shift ended. She was the daughter of the president of a large laundromat that cleaned Sun Knight uniforms. Three months ago, she would have never considered working at a restaurant, but her situation had changed quickly when her father had an affair and abandoned his family. Her mother grabbed her and her little brother and fled from their home to escape the company’s debt collectors, and while they managed to get away, they soon began to have trouble supporting themselves.

Shortly afterward, Fil decided to get a part-time job after school. She didn’t lament their situation at all. Her father had always been prone to adultery, and it was actually a relief to be away from him. Working to support her mother and brother made her feel happy.

That was how Fil ended up working at Eterna. The more accustomed she grew to her job, the more truant she became at school. She would often pretend to leave for school in the morning, sleep at a friend’s house until the afternoon, then go straight to the restaurant. The manager was sympathetic toward her and increased her shifts and salary without a word. She was quickly obtaining financial freedom that few children her age enjoyed.

That night, the manager told Fil that on her next shift, he would show her how to skewer meat onto a kebab. She was already

becoming a full-fledged worker at her young age, with hardly a need for school. She even felt that she didn't need an adult to support her.

That overconfidence was what led Fil to walk home alone at night. There were rumors of the Steppingman appearing after dark, but she dismissed them with a laugh. As an adult, she believed she had no need to fear such urban legends.

She could not have been more wrong.

"Mrmm?! Mrmmrmm?!"

Someone grabbed Fil and covered her mouth. She struggled to no avail. Strangely, she couldn't see her assailant. Her arms were bound behind her back, and she couldn't open her mouth, but there was no arm or hand in sight.

"Relax, I won't kill you. If you don't resist, that is," a voice whispered.

Fil didn't listen and continued to struggle. As much as she believed herself to be an adult, she couldn't keep her cool in a life-threatening situation.

"Mrmm! Mrmmm!"

"Dammit, maybe I should put her to sleep. I don't want anyone interfering again..."

"Ahhhhhhh! Swords are not meant to be thrown, you fool!"

Fil's unwillingness to quit struggling ended up saving her. The brief hesitation of her captor—who was none other than the Steppingman—gave Bond time to crash into their back after being thrown as a projectile.

"Wha...? Oof!" the Steppingman grunted.

The Survivors had been monitoring the southeast district of Labyrinth City using the information that Ada had given them. The Steppingman was clearly an elite fighter, but they had grown surprisingly sloppy over time. They only ever acted in a very limited time frame.

It was Ada who discovered this, of course. She may have been a drunken nuisance—which was especially problematic for a bouncer at a bar—but she was of good character and had many connections. She asked around at bars to conduct a detailed investigation and to figure out the names of the children who had gone missing, how many there were, and what time they were thought to have disappeared. That process led her to an unexpected encounter with the Steppingman and a trip to the hospital, but she still obtained plenty of useful information. One important thing she learned was that they only operated between ten at night and one in the morning, when bars closed.

"Dammit... How dare you pull the same move on me twice!" the Steppingman cursed.

“You have your own stupidity to blame for that... Drats, I used too much of my strength. Someone help,” Bond called out.

While the limited time frame was helpful, there was still the issue of Labyrinth City’s immense size. Bond proved useful here by using his Parallel and Search abilities to find the culprit and to monitor the entire southeast district. The party also prepared by having everyone other than Bond take Zem’s illusion-dispelling medicine, allowing them to deal with the Steppingman’s dangerous ability to conceal themselves from plain sight. That removed half the challenge of fighting them, leaving only their formidable strength in combat.

“Now we hit ’em with all we’ve got. Bond, grab the girl and run!” Nick yelled. He stepped between the Steppingman and the girl and swung his dagger. The criminal avoided it with a quick step back. Nick may have missed, but he succeeded at buying time for Bond to grab the girl’s hand and run away.

“Why you little...!” The criminal glared at Bond angrily, but it was already too late to get the girl back.

“Glare all you want. I’m the sword that smiles back! Tiana, now!” Bond shouted.

“Okay! *Ice Spear!*”

Tiana spit out a leaf she was chewing and chanted a spell, firing a sharp icicle at the Steppingman when she finished.

“Ngh... *Diamond Shield!*”

The Steppingman quickly defended themselves by using an earth spell to summon a shield made of synthetic diamond. It was resistant to cold, electricity, and physical attacks, but weak to fire and heat.

“Karan, use your fire!” Nick shouted.

“Haaaah!” Karan obliged by using Fire Breath to envelop the Diamond Shield in flames, causing it to glow white and burn, but the Steppingman was no longer behind it. They had used the flames as a smoke screen to draw out the chains within their sleeves and to dodge the party’s attacks with angular and dazzling movements.

“Crap, they never stop moving!” Nick cursed.

“Above you, Tiana!” Zem warned from behind, a moment before the Steppingman descended on Tiana like lightning, whipping their chains with enough force to punch a hole in the ground.

“Look out!” Nick yelled.

“Ahh!” Tiana screamed.

Nick pushed Tiana out of the way, dodged the chains, and countered the Steppingman with a kick. “Dammit,” he muttered, realizing that he’d screwed up. His kick sent the Steppingman flying, but the kick wasn’t hard enough for that to make sense. The criminal had used his kick to propel themselves backward, giving themselves space to turn their back and run away. They had judged the situation

to be unfavorable.

“Stop right there!” Karan shouted. She ran after the Steppingman and used Fire Breath to shoot a fireball, but they avoided it without even turning around. It took a lot of skill to dodge a projectile using only your intuition. Nick, however, predicted the Steppingman would dodge that way and threw his dagger after them.

“Shit!” he cursed. He was a second too late. The Steppingman kicked off the ground, wrapped their chains around the pillar of a building, swung onto a wall, and jumped off it into the air. They landed on a roof and hopped from building to building until they disappeared from sight.

“You cannot be serious! Don’t run away, you goddamn coward!” Tiana yelled after the Steppingman in frustration. Unsurprisingly, they did not respond.

Nick sighed loudly. “They got away, but this isn’t a bad result. We have more leads than we did before, including where they appeared, the direction they fled in, and what we saw of their fighting style. Also...”

“We saved the girl. We did not win the fight, but the Steppingman clearly lost,” Zem finished for Nick.

“All right, let’s go back to the guild. We should rest,” Nick said.

The Survivors started walking to Manhunt, doing their best to get over their disappointment. They had designated the guild as a meeting place if they ever got separated, so they would likely find Bond and the girl there.

“Hmm...?”

Something caused Nick to stop in his tracks, and the others followed suit.

“What do we have here? Two girls and two guys, eh? This is a dangerous place for a late-night stroll.”

“Heh-heh, those’re nice robes yer wearin’, too.”

“Lay down yer valuables. Or would you rather join us fer a night o’ fun?”

Ten men appeared and surrounded the Survivors, seeming to think they could overwhelm the party with ease. They clearly had not witnessed that last battle.

“They look like they threaten people regularly... They could have bounties on their heads,” Nick said.

“Oh, sweet. You don’t know any of them, do you, Zem?” Tiana asked.

“Of course not. And I would not care if I did,” Zem responded.

“Then let’s do this,” Karan said, taking a short breath to ready herself.

The Survivors were visibly excited about the ambush—this was

the perfect chance to blow off some steam after the unsatisfying experience of letting the Steppingman get away. Their reaction angered the men.

“Who do you punks think you are?! The dragonian is the only one who looks strong! Get ‘em!” one of them shouted.

“What exactly were you all doing?” Bond asked.

“Oh, hey Bond. Where’s the girl?” Nick responded.

Bond ended up finding the rest of the group after they dealt with the assailants. Nick ignored his question; it was clear what they were doing.

“She lives nearby, so I walked her home. What happened here?”

“We got sidetracked. Help us out.”

Bond looked exasperated, but he helped Nick tie up the men. Seven of them had been knocked out, and the remaining three had lumps all over their faces. They had realized they had no chance and had lost the will to resist.

“Watch closely. When tying a knot, make a loop like this and pull the rope through. Try it, Tiana,” Nick instructed.

“Okay,” she responded.

“This’ll be a useful skill when traveling. Professional peddlers use this knot to secure their luggage.”

The men looked at Nick uncomfortably as he used them to teach the party how to tie knots.

“C-can you not use us for practice...?” one of them complained.

“You’re gonna have to put up with it, man. Actually, that knot probably hurts. We’ll retie it, so stay put,” Nick said.

“But...”

The man continued to protest weakly as Tiana tied him up. Nick thought he should be grateful she hadn’t frozen him or lit him on fire.

The Survivors resumed their trek to Manhunt as Nick taught them how to tie ropes.

“Weren’t you guys going after the Steppingman? Eh, whatever. I appreciate you doing normal jobs like this, too,” the receptionist said after Nick started the paperwork at the desk. She snickered and started to identify the ruffians. Many of the men turned out to be habitual criminals with bounties on their heads, albeit small ones.

“That’s all of them identified... You guys must be tired after working so late at night,” the receptionist said.

“I could say the same to you. This place never closes,” Nick responded.

“Trust me, I want to go home and sleep just as much as you,” she complained as she handed Nick the reward. Tiana peered at it with

great interest.

“So how much was it?” she asked.

“Their bounties added up to about one hundred thousand dina,” Nick answered.

“Hey, that’s not bad.” Tiana chuckled and rubbed the coins before handing them to Karan. Guarding the money was Karan’s job.

“Adventurers who go after expensive bounties don’t usually last very long. The ones who picked a fight with you earlier might be idiots, but they’re good at their jobs,” the receptionist said, motioning toward the other adventurers in the guild with her chin.

There were a lot of eccentric types you didn’t see in other Adventurers Guild branches, including a shirtless dual sword wielder, a mage who was covered in tattoos from head to toe, a priestly man who looked even more depraved than Zem, and a houndian who had dyed their fur the color of the rainbow. Only at Manhunt would you find adventurers who looked so dangerous.

“I’ll bet. They all look strong,” Nick responded.

“You think so?” Tiana asked.

“High-ranking adventurers who are eccentric like these guys are known for being unpredictable. That’s how you get weirdos like the Steppingman,” Nick said.

“Olivia was plenty odd herself,” Tiana said.

“Oh yeah, what happened with her?” Nick asked, and the receptionist sighed deeply.

“The publishing company she works for was deserted. Olivia seems to have gone into hiding... Which is something she’s very good at,” she answered.

“Th-that’s rough,” Nick said.

“You sure did bring us a headache of a case. Well, you’re doing good work, so who am I to complain?” the receptionist said, glaring at them. Nick shrugged in response.

“Our only goal is to find the Steppingman,” he said.

“Olivia posing as the Steppingman and kidnapping children... That’s a little difficult to believe.”

“Sure, but she started acting weird the moment I mentioned it. And while I couldn’t see their face in our fight earlier, the Steppingman’s movements resembled hers. I think, anyway.”

“You fought the Steppingman? Where?”

“East of here near the restaurant with the good eel. Here’s what happened...”

Nick recalled the incident with Olivia as he explained the night’s events to the receptionist. Olivia displayed abnormal skill when she fled from Manhunt. The Steppingman also seemed like they had undergone thorough training. He felt like there were similarities in

their gravity-defying movements.

“Are you guys gonna keep looking for the Steppingman?” the receptionist asked.

“Yep.”

“Then leave Olivia to us. That’ll be more efficient.”

“Got it. Do you have information on anything other than Olivia?”

“You’re our number one source.”

“So you’ve got nothing.”

Nick sighed.

“I have heard reports of footsteps at night and children nearly being kidnapped, but I couldn’t tell you what’s related and what’s not. You guys are the only ones who are assuming one criminal is behind it all. If anything, I should be asking you for information,” the receptionist said.

“That’s because the criminal is concealing themselves with magic,” Bond grumbled.

“Oh yeah, there’s that. Can Olivia use that kind of magic?” Nick asked.

“I’ve never seen Olivia use proper magic. Is it possible they’re using a magic item instead of a spell?” she asked.

“That would make sense, actually,” Nick responded. “We’ve seen the Steppingman use weird chain-like magic items and earth magic... It’s hard to imagine they could do all that and perform illusion magic without hampering their ability to fight.”

“Then why not perform an investigation under that assumption? You don’t see powerful magic items like that every day. You might find a lead if you figure out where such a rare item could have come from.”

Nick felt for a second like a path may have been opened for them, but his expression quickly darkened. “We might have stood a chance of figuring out where it came from if it was an ordinary magic item anyone could buy, but something like that would have to be an artifact. If only we knew an expert...”

“An expert on magic items? We know one,” Tiana said unexpectedly.

“Huh? Who?” Nick asked.

“You know who I’m talking about. You visited him in prison not that long ago.”

The mention of prison jogged Nick’s memory.

“You mean Leon...?” Nick said, grimacing at the name of a past enemy. Tiana looked amused.

“Exactly. Didn’t he excavate and sell a bunch of them? He must know a lot about the artifacts. He was even hiding a holy sword.”

“I can’t stand the Sun Knight prison or the arrogant pricks who

work there, so I don't really wanna go, but...I'll do it."

"That was surprisingly easy."

"Our conversation was cut short last time right when he was about to tell me something important. I've been meaning to go for a while, but I kept putting it off."

"I can go instead if you really don't want to," Tiana offered.

"No, it's fine. I'm probably the easiest one for him to speak to."

"True. The rest of us don't have much of a connection with him."

"Yeah."

The other Survivors all seemed on board with that decision.

"All right, Karan and I will go after we get some rest," Nick announced.

"I'm going?" Karan asked, puzzled.

"Remember what I told you? You must have some questions for him."

Comprehension quickly dawned on Karan's face. Leon said something interesting after he was arrested—he mentioned a man named Callios, which happened to be the name of the person who had stolen Karan's dragon king gem, her family's precious treasure. Nick's time with Leon ran out before he could ask him about it.

"Okay," Karan said.

"Cool. Now let's go to bed. I'm beyond exhausted," Nick said.

The sun had already started to rise, brightening the night sky. Some adventurers began to leave the guild in small groups, just as others arrived for an early start to their day. Manhunt was never empty of adventurers; criminals did not operate on fixed schedules, and neither did those who worked to catch them.

And so the Survivors' long night came to an end.

The next day, Nick and Karan went to the Sun Knight prison. The visitation room was just as gloomy and damp as Nick remembered. They were sitting across from Leon, a large tigerian who was the leader of an adventurers' party called the Iron Tiger Troop. He was imprisoned after Nick found proof of his habitual fraud. He had also been a member of a party that specialized in excavating and selling magic items, and until his arrest, he secretly possessed the Sword of Ruin, which was a holy sword just like the Sword of Bonds.

"Here, I brought you a snack," Nick said, offering him a steamed bun. Leon picked it up with a displeased expression.

"Normally, people bring confectionery that won't expire quickly," he complained.

"Oh, shut up. I'll take it back if you don't want it."

"Calm down, man. I never said that."

Leon took a large bite. Small pieces of citrus fruit peels had been

kneaded into the dough, giving the bun a refreshingly sour taste. That was complemented by the slightly heavy cream on the inside made of egg yolk, sugar, and milk. Nick had bought it without a second thought, at Karan's recommendation, but now he found himself wishing he had chosen something cheaper.

"Hey, this is good," Leon said, eliciting a boastful smile from Karan. She chose the steamed bun because it was a popular new item that she quite liked at a confectionery shop near the Fishermen guild. "Do you have any tobacco?"

"Of course not," Nick responded.

"Oh, fine... I guess I'm doin' all right without tobacco and booze for now. It's the lack of sweets that's really killin' me. It's not like I was ever that fond of them, but you develop a real cravin' for them while livin' in a place like this, you know what I mean?"

"I'd rather not."

"Yeah, I guess not. Oh, right. I hear they're holdin' my trial within the next couple months. They're still decidin' on the actual date."

"You sure sound nonchalant about it. You realize what's at stake, right?"

"I'm tryin' not to think about it. I'd go crazy otherwise. They're takin' my entire collection of magic items and puttin' them up for auction."

Leon sighed exaggeratedly and leaned back in his chair.

"You have a collection?"

"Magic items and artifacts are my specialty. Fraud was just a side hustle."

"Quit trying to sound cool. Look where your 'side hustle' got you."

"Yeah, thanks to you... So what do you want?"

"First off, we were interrupted last time. Tell me about the man named Callios."

"Sure, but... By 'first off,' it sounds like you have more to ask me."

"I wanna talk about a criminal we're pursuing."

"Hmm... Well, that's fine by me."

"Let's talk about the job first. We can save Callios for later," Karan said.

"Are you sure?" Nick asked, surprised.

"We're only given a limited amount of time, right? There's no rush with my issue."

"All right. Here's what's going on..."

Nick began to summarize the Steppingman case. Leon listened with a bored expression at first, but he frowned when Nick explained that they were using a magic item that hid the user from being perceived and prevented people from remembering their features.

"So, Leon. Does a magic item like that ring any bells?" Nick asked.

Leon closed his eyes, still frowning. He sat there in silence.

"Hey," Karan urged impatiently, and Leon calmly opened his eyes.

"Sorry, I was thinking," he responded.

"Come on, man...", Nick said.

"A phantom king orb. Or rather, a magic item using a phantom king orb," Leon said suddenly.

"Huh?" Nick blurted out, taken aback. He wasn't expecting a real answer.

"There was a race of ghostlike people in ancient times called phantasms that didn't have physical bodies. I don't know much about them, but they apparently only existed within items used to exchange information like communication orbs and telepathy orbs."

"What the heck does that mean?"

"Like I said, I don't know much about them. Anyway, they were supposedly good at screwin' with people's perception. The phantasms produced treasures called phantom king orbs."

"That's what the criminal is using to hide in plain sight?"

"I'm just guessing, but they could be using a magic item to control the orb and make it easier to cast specific spells. Items like phantom king orbs that were made to represent a race typically function to amplify the traits of their people or to bestow their special abilities on a person of another race. They have a wide range of uses, but they're difficult to control."

"Can you think of any weaknesses the orbs might have?"

"Weaknesses, huh...?"

Leon smiled suggestively.

"You look like you know something. What do you want?"

Nick braced himself, assuming Leon was going to demand something big in return. What the tigerian said next caught him off guard.

"I want you to steal the phantom king orb."

"I can't give you a magic item, and I wouldn't if I could. Are you planning a jailbreak?"

"No, I'm not. I want you to seal it like you did with the Sword of Evolution or sell it to someone reputable. Don't let it end up on the black market."

Nick was surprised by how calmly Leon was speaking. This might have been closer to the real Leon than his usual, rough behavior.

"And make them tell you where they got it," Leon finished.

"Sure, but... Why?" Nick asked.

"My brother's the one who found the phantom king orb." Leon hung his head, seeming to stare off into the distance. "It's one of the artifacts that disappeared after he died. By the time I started looking for it, the trail had gone cold."

“...Huh.”

After testifying as a victim as part of the Sun Knights' investigation, Nick gained a general understanding of Leon's past. He learned that Leon was part of an adventurers' party that specialized in exploring old ruins for artifacts until he lost his brother and his party members. He probably had complicated feelings about the gem. Nick stayed silent rather than offer any words of sympathy or derision.

The silence stretched for a few minutes until Leon took another bite of the steamed bun. He somehow managed to look stoic as he enjoyed the sweet taste of the confection.

“And one more thing: Bring me some tobacco next time. Preferably a cigarette. And a match, too,” Leon said.

“No,” Nick responded.

“Huh? Why not?”

“It's against the rules to bring alcohol, tobacco, cannabis, or any medicine without the permission of a doctor. That's the one thing the Sun Knights won't allow, even if you try to bribe them. Give it up.”

“Tch, how lame. There's no broker or supplier, either...,” Leon complained. That caught Nick's attention.

“Are there brokers for stolen and excavated magic items?” he asked.

“Yep.” Leon gave a small yet confident nod. “I hear about people with connections to collectors among the nobility and the rich. But the real troublesome ones are the underground brokers who accommodate robbers and wanted criminals and make backdoor deals with nobles and knights.”

“Do you know any?”

“What, do you have somethin' you wanna sell? I doubt you're lookin' to buy.”

“No. There's something we want to recover.”

“Something was stolen from you, then?”

“...My dragon king gem,” Karan answered. Her voice was much colder than usual. Leon studied her before returning his gaze to Nick.

“Dragon king gems aren't that rare. Gems, or orbs, from extinct races are hard to find, but dragonians are still around, even if they're small in number. There are also multiple different clans like the fire dragon clan and the water dragon clan, so there are plenty of people who can make the gems. It's not scarcity that decides the cost, but the quality of the gem and the power contained within. What's your gem like?”

“It's a ruby that the clan chief spent years filling with power,” Karan replied.

“Huh... Sounds like the highest quality gem that can be achieved in the modern era. One million dina wouldn't be enough to buy that,”

Leon muttered, astonished.

“What can we do to find it?” Nick asked.

“There are only so many people who could buy or sell that kinda gem... And no one would buy it on the spot with cash. It was probably put up for auction.”

“Really?”

“There’s an auction where anythin’ goes, includin’ stolen goods and items of unknown origin. The location changes every time, so I don’t know when or where it takes place.”

“You never participated?”

“Never. You need a proper rank or a special invitation to attend as a buyer. The suppliers can only entrust their goods to management and receive the money later. I’d been considerin’ throwing money at a poor noble family to buy myself status, but you know...” Leon spread open his arms and motioned to the room to finish his sentence. “A tobacconist in the north district manages the items from Labyrinth City. Tell him you’re looking for a ‘giraffe pipe,’ and he’ll take you to a secret room where the stolen items are displayed. You can ask about the gem there.”

“Is it possible Callios is their broker?” Nick asked, but Leon shook his head.

“Unlikely. I don’t think he’s a small-time broker in Labyrinth City. He has the backing of someone with real influence.”

“What makes you say that?”

“The Silver Tiger Troop dealt with a lot of middlemen when selling artifacts, but Callios was a weird one. He just seemed like some loser using a false name, but all the other brokers in Labyrinth City were scared of him. It wasn’t outta some reverence for his position, either; they were legitimately terrified.”

“Then who is he?”

“Beats me. It takes a lot to scare those brokers. Maybe he’s a big shot in a band of thieves, or a martial artist from the Sanctuary of Virginie... All I know is that fear probably wasn’t unfounded. I recommend you stay away from him unless you wanna end up like me.”

“We can’t do that. He stole the dragon king gem.”

“Yikes... That’s some tough luck,” Leon said to Karan.

Nick looked at his party member with concern, but she didn’t say anything. She simply crossed her arms and took in Leon’s words in silence.

“Anyway, thanks for the information,” Nick said.

“Do your best out there,” Leon responded.

“Will do.”

“Tch... I’m already done.”

Leon crumpled the steamed bun's wrapper and tossed it onto the ground.

"That's bad manners," Karan said.

"Who cares? There's no one to offend in an empty, depressing room like this," Leon said, laughing flippantly.

"Don't tease her. And we're not done here," Nick said.

"Oh yeah, we got offtrack. What were we talking about again? Right, the weaknesses of the phantom king orb."

"Yeah. Tell us what you know. It'll help us retrieve the magic item and figure out where it came from."

"Breaking an illusion is not that hard," Leon began, holding up two fingers. "The first way you can do it is by using stimulating medicine or healing magic. Not many people can use the particular spell, though, and you build a tolerance to the medicine if you take too much of it in a short period of time. It's not a reliable method."

"We know about that already. What's the other one?"

"The easiest and most certain way is to figure out the truth behind the illusion. If a person warps your perception, all you have to do is return it to normal. You can do that by facing them and saying their name."

Nick's eyes went wide with surprise. That sounded too easy.

"Will that really work?" he asked.

"If you try this, make sure you don't get it wrong. The point of this is to strengthen your perception of the enemy, so guessing a bunch of names at random won't work. You have to be sure of their identity. Get it right on the first try."

"That means we have to figure out who they are...", Nick said, looking troubled. Leon snickered in response.

"You'd better get to work, detective."

"That feels wrong coming from someone I put in jail."

Nick and Karan left the prison once the time for their visit was up. On the way back to Anemone Alehouse, Karan abruptly stopped on the side of the road.

"What's wrong, Karan?" Nick asked.

"...Thanks, Nick," she said.

"Huh? For what?"

"For caring about my lost gem."

"Oh... No problem," Nick responded quietly, to hide his embarrassment. Karan sighed and continued.

"You're amazing, Nick."

"Hey, you're embarrassing me."

"I don't know how you can speak so normally to a guy you used to hate... You're so different from me," she said, leaning on a wall and

looking up at the sky.

"What're you talking about...? You're doing just fine. I've never seen you lose your cool. You even kept it together when Leon gave us that lead back there," Nick said.

"No, I was just holding it in. I wanted to scream when we were talking about my dragon king gem, but that would've just gotten us thrown out by the Sun Knights."

"I guess so."

"I don't think I would be able to stay composed like you if I saw my old party members. I'd probably bite their heads off."

A sharp tooth poked out from Karan's mouth as she giggled. It was as shiny and white as a magic sword. She meant those words literally. When a dragonian got truly angry, they didn't need a weapon to kill.

"Honestly, I'm happy. I've found a lead, I have a stable job, and I'm even studying... I feel like I'm moving forward. I couldn't have imagined things going this well when I nearly died in that labyrinth. But I still have bad memories. And when I think of them, I get so angry, I surprise even myself," Karan said.

"Hmm," Nick replied.

"I'm glad I became an adventurer. If I hadn't, I might've become a crook that preyed on the weak like those guys we just caught. Zem said the same thing about himself, but I think I would've been worse off."

"I don't know what would've happened to me, either, if I had quit working as an adventurer."

"If you had been a bad person when you met us... If you had asked me to join you and make a living by hurting others... I would have become a bad person, too. So please, remain the Nick that I know."

"Hey, Karan."

"What?"

Karan was staring off into the distance. She wasn't paying attention to her surroundings, and as a warrior, that was a mistake.

"Hi-yah."

"Ow!"

Nick lightly flicked her forehead.

"Wh-what did you do that for?!" Karan shouted.

"No reason... You were just being silly," Nick responded with a mischievous smile. Karan's eyes darted about in confusion. "We're a lot alike, Karan. We have similar fears."

"Y-yeah."

"I'll keep on doubting you. You won't turn into a villain under my watch."

"Nick..."

“I won’t let you bite any heads off, either.” Nick gave Karan another teasing grin as she watched him anxiously. “It would kill your stomach, after all. A gourmet like you should have no trouble finding something better to eat.”

“I never said I would eat it!”

“I’m joking. You can do whatever you want. I’ll be there for you no matter what happens. But...”

“Yeah?”

“This world is full of fun things to do, and delicious foods to eat, right?”

“Mm-hmm.”

“I’m no priest, so I won’t tell you not to seek revenge. I mean, I’m kinda out for payback myself. But I don’t think you should give up the things you value in life. I like idols and going on adventures with the party, and I’m not gonna abandon those for the sake of my revenge. It’d be a waste to throw all that away for someone you hate.”

“So I should think about what I want to do?”

“Would that be eating at a bunch of different restaurants?”

“That’s just a hobby... It’s more of a daily routine than something I really want to do.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s good to have hobbies.”

“Sure, but... There has to be something else. Getting revenge and taking back my gem aren’t really things I want to do, either. Those are things I *have* to do.”

“That makes sense.”

“What *do* I want to do?” Karan muttered. “There might not be anything.”

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with that. I think continuing to work as an adventurer would be just fine,” Nick responded.

“Yeah...”

“Oh right, didn’t you leave your village to become an adventurer? Let’s just focus on enjoying the adventurer lifestyle.”

“No... I didn’t.”

“Really?”

Karan nodded with a blank expression. “Becoming one wasn’t my goal. I left to fulfill the dragonian mission.”

“Mission? What do you mean?”

“I left to find my he...” Karan stopped before she finished.

“He-what?” Nick prodded.

“It’s a secret.”

“Huh? You were about to tell me.”

“I don’t want to say it.”

“Huh... Well, I won’t force you.”

Karan looked away in embarrassment. Nick was only able to get a

glimpse of her bright red cheeks.

"I'm not gonna tell you."

"You don't have to. But promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Make sure you don't forget about that mission."

"...Okay."

They looked up and realized that the sky had begun to turn pink. Deciding they should get moving, they walked through a park and blended into the foot traffic of the city. Their shadows stretched on the ground until they became long black lines, the differences between their races indistinguishable. They were kindred spirits despite their entirely different backgrounds.

It was past the usual opening time for Anemone Alehouse when Nick and Karan returned, but there were no customers. People were becoming more reluctant to go out at night now that the rumors of a kidnapper were becoming more credible. Nick had been planning to cover Karan's eyes and flee if there were any drunk customers or employees getting up to anything unsightly, but that fear proved unnecessary. The lack of business was bad for the bar, however, and Redd was not hiding their displeasure.

"Can you please hurry up and catch this guy? We just had to spend a bunch of money fixing a leak in the roof, and we're not going to make up for it if I have to keep sitting around twiddling my thumbs," Redd complained.

"Direct your complaints to the kidnapper everyone refused to believe exists. There's only so much we can do. We're bounty hunters, not knights," Nick responded, annoyed.

"Catching bad guys is what bounty hunters do. I'll give you whatever support you need, so do your best to find them. I'm letting you use this bar as a meeting place free of charge."

"That's a big help."

Anemone Alehouse had gradually become the Survivors' base of operations. Tiana, Zem, Bond, and Ada were occupying a large table in the customer seating area as they studied maps and documents.

"But I'll treat you like regular customers if you buy something. Want a drink?" Redd moved behind the counter, and without waiting for Nick's answer, began pouring glasses of alcohol and water.

"At least let me order first... Eh, whatever," Nick said.

"So did you learn anything?" Ada asked.

"Yeah, a decent amount."

Nick summarized what they'd heard from Leon.

"Interesting. So saying the culprit's name will dispel their illusion magic," Ada said.

“That’s good to know, but then we’re back at the beginning. We have to figure out their identity,” Nick responded.

“Did you find any leads at the Manhunt guild?”

“Not really. There’s a suspicious magazine reporter named Olivia, but...”

“A reporter? Seriously?”

Ada looked dubious.

“I know it’s hard to believe, but she went nuts and ran away when I mentioned the Steppingman at the guild,” Nick said.

“Why not use her name, then? The odds aren’t bad,” Ada suggested.

“We have to be more careful than that. Even if we get their name right, the job will be far from over. They probably have their guard up after our last couple encounters. We can prevent a kidnapping, but if they decide to run, we won’t be able to catch them.”

“Oh, I see. You need to be able to keep up with them.”

“How in the world did they get so nimble anyway? Even a master of martial arts shouldn’t be able to move like that,” Nick grumbled.

“Something about that has been bothering me. Can I ask you a question, Ada?” Zem inquired.

“What is it?”

“You said you fought the Steppingman before.”

“Yeah, and I have this to show for it.” Ada pointed at her broken leg.

“But you survived. I have my doubts as to how you could have fought such a formidable opponent on your own.”

“Hey, are you accusing me of something?” Ada grunted unhappily, but Zem ignored her and continued.

“The culprit is as nimble as a cat and can render themselves invisible. You could not have fought them unless you had a countermeasure.”

“Oh, that’s what you mean. Want me to tell you how I did it?” Ada grinned, seeming to realize what he was talking about.

“No, I already have a good guess. You used strengthening magic, didn’t you?”

“Oh, you’ve already figured it out.” Ada sighed in disappointment and plopped down onto a couch.

“You don’t look like a mage,” Nick mumbled, skeptical.

“I’m not. I only have four spells in my arsenal, and they’re not that hard. I can use Magic Sense, Sharpen Senses, Light Body, which makes your body lighter, and Heavy Body, which does the opposite. They’re all basic strengthening spells,” Ada explained.

“I’ve never heard of those... Can you use any of them, Zem?” Nick asked.

“No, I cannot,” Zem replied, shaking his head. Ada smiled in response.

“Hey, it’s not often I can say I can best a priest at magic. But I’m impressed you figured that out. Not many priests have heard of these spells.”

“You are right. I was looking into them recently for a different purpose.”

“Why’s that?” Nick inquired. Zem reacted with surprise.

“Did you forget? I told you I would look into basic strengthening spells that you might be able to use,” he said.

“Oh, right! Thanks, Zem.”

“Don’t worry about it. You can repay me by accompanying me for another night of fun.”

“I’ll get back to you on that.”

“It seems I’ve been rejected...,” Zem said jokingly, and everyone laughed. “Anyhow, the spells Ada mentioned are not difficult to use. I think you can handle them even with your small amount of mana. However...the effects will be challenging to deal with.”

“What do you mean?” Nick asked.

“Imagine coming across something as spicy as Labyrinth Chicken after suddenly gaining a sense of smell as sharp as a dog’s or a cat’s,” Zem answered.

“...Ah,” Nick responded, seeing his point.

“Wait, that doesn’t make sense. You’ve used Invigorate and Fortify on us countless times, and it’s never felt uncomfortable,” Tiana said doubtfully.

“That is because those are the complete, safe versions of those spells. They have been modified to avoid such problems. For example, Invigorate calibrates the target’s body so that their increased muscle strength won’t lead to injury. It strengthens their skin and bones to protect their body and limits the intensity so it doesn’t go too far,” Zem explained.

Everyone looked impressed.

“So basically, Ada’s spells are the opposite,” Nick mumbled.

“Yes, that’s right. They are primitive strengthening spells that have not been modified for safety. You have no choice but to account for your increased strength with mana and by adjusting your movements. Simply learning the spells is easy, but mastering them is difficult,” Zem continued.

Ada grinned. “They require more skill than other spells for that reason. You’ll hurt yourself if you invest too much mana, so the trick is to use as little as possible. They’re actually easier for warriors to learn than mages.”

“That’s how you noticed the Steppingman,” Nick said.

“Yeah. I’m best at Sharpen Senses, and second best at Light Body. The former improves your hearing, vision, and smell, which makes it perfect for a scout. Man, you have no idea how creepy it was when I found that bastard. I could hear and smell them, but there wasn’t a person in sight.”

“That explains how you were able to fight them,” Nick said.

“I was barely able to keep up with them, though...,” Ada muttered regretfully. Nick and Zem only appeared more impressed, and they leaned forward excitedly.

“Does that mean the Steppingman is using similar magic?” Nick asked.

“I was going to inquire about the same thing. What do you think?”

Ada nodded in response. “I think so. I’m positive they use Light Body.”

“Just like we thought!”

“I knew it.”

Nick and Zem looked at each other happily. They were gradually learning more about the Steppingman. This was a small but sure step toward discovering their identity.

Karan spoke up next. “Olivia was really quick back at the guild. Can we assume it’s her?”

“Hmm. It’s true that what she did would be impossible without some trick...,” Nick said, feeling inclined to agree, but Ada shook her head.

“No, that’s not definitive proof. There aren’t many people who can use Light Body, but there are enough that we can’t use that alone to identify the culprit. The spell isn’t a closely guarded secret.”

“I see. That is unfortunate,” Zem said, but he didn’t look too disappointed. It seemed like he had expected that. “Anyway... Would you be willing to teach us how to use it? It would help us catch the Steppingman.”

“Huh? Who would I teach it to? Not to brag, but it’s a very difficult spell,” Ada responded.

“Well...,” Zem began, looking at Nick.

“Me?” Nick asked.

“Who else? You’re the only one capable of doing it, Nick. You shouldn’t let this opportunity go to waste,” Tiana said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“Sure, but what makes you think she’d be willing to help me? You can’t teach spells like this to just anybody,” Nick responded.

“I don’t mind,” Ada said casually.

“Huh?” Nick responded, surprised.

“It’s not like I have it patented. I learned it from someone myself.”

“Does that mean you have a teacher?”

“I had one. But they never said it was a secret. They even told me I could teach it to anyone I wanted ’cause there are very few people capable of learning it.”

“They sound like an admirable person.”

What Ada said about her teacher defied norms for Nick. Adventurers took pride in their skills, whether they practiced swordsmanship, martial arts, or magic. They were always happy to teach their companions how to take on jobs at the guild or give advice on labyrinths, but they rarely shared their fighting techniques with others. Most adventurers were very secretive when it came to that.

“Are you sure you wanna rely on it, though? You can learn the spell in a day, but mastering it is a different matter.”

“It’s fine,” Nick responded, shaking his head. “I don’t need to master it. All I need to do is jump as high as the Steppingman once or twice, and I’ll manage.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m not trying to become an acrobat. I just care about catching the culprit.”

Tiana grinned mischievously. “You have another dirty trick in mind, don’t you?”

“Hey, do you have to say it like that?!” Nick shouted.

“Come on, we all appreciate that side of you. Right?” Tiana asked, looking at Zem, Karan, and Bond in turn. They all agreed.

“Do you all think that way about me?!” Nick exclaimed.

“There’s no need to be offended. We’re counting on you,” Zem said.

“Yeah. We’re not criticizing you,” Karan agreed.

“I still don’t like it...,” Nick said with a grimace. Ada patted him on the shoulder.

“What’s the problem? Every adventurers’ party needs someone whose moral compass is just slightly off,” she said.

“I think that’s where you’re supposed to deny their accusations,” Nick responded.

“How am I supposed to know that? Anyway, you need to focus on learning the spell first. You’re gonna call me ‘master’ from now on. You’re gonna become a pro after I’m done with you.”

“I’m honored.”

Nick shrugged his shoulders in exasperation.

Nick’s training began the next day in the back alley behind Anemone Alehouse beside a clothesline. There wasn’t a single cloud in the sky, and a gentle breeze made the hanging laundry sway. Nick was stretching to warm up.

“Wow, you’re so flexible!” Reina exclaimed with surprise. Nick

had bent forward with his legs straight and put his hands flat against the ground.

"You're less likely to get injured if you have flexible joints," he responded proudly.

"That's amazing!" she looked at him with true admiration.

"You're flexible, too, Reina," Ada said.

"But I'm not as good as Nick!"

"Go easy on her. She's just a kid."

"Since when was this a competition?!" Nick bellowed.

Ada patted Reina on the head and glared at him with obvious displeasure. Nick figured she was joking, but she was surprisingly protective of her daughter. Her face had an ageless beauty to it, but her expression at that moment was entirely that of a mother.

"You're flexible, too, Karan," Nick said.

"Really?" Karan responded, tilting her head. She had been asked to help with training.

"I've seen it on our adventures. You wouldn't be able to fight the way you do without great agility and flexibility."

Karan turned away in embarrassment. "D-don't stare at me like that."

"Whoops, sorry."

Karan glared at him, her embarrassment seeming to grow.

"..."

"I—I apologized, didn't I?"

"Forget it."

"Hey, enough flirting," Ada interrupted, patting Nick's shoulders. Nick braced himself, ready to start training in earnest. "Like I said, I can use four spells: Mana Sense, Sharpen Senses, Light Body, and Heavy Body. We're gonna focus on Light Body."

"Great."

"I can't demonstrate 'cause of my injury, but watching me wouldn't do you much good anyway. Try it yourself and learn as you fall. That's the quickest way."

"What makes you so sure I'm gonna fall?"

"All right, chant it just as I taught you."

Nick followed her instructions and chanted the spell quietly. "*Light Body.*"

"Release the tension from your body. Think of yourself as a feather or a piece of paper."

"Got it."

"Very good. There's no need to use a lot of mana. Relax your muscles, too. You want to use a minimum amount of magical and bodily strength... Now, take one step forward."

Nick slowly stepped forward. The ground felt shockingly light,

almost like he was walking on straw.

"I really do feel like I'm gonna fall," he said.

"I'm impressed you haven't yet. Now try walking normally," Ada instructed.

"Okay."

Nick started forward with his familiar method of walking. The leader of his former party had taught him more than how to punch and kick—he'd also taught him various methods for ordinary actions such as breathing, walking, and standing. Nick had gained such full control over his body that he could defeat most monsters without even using a weapon.

Man, this takes me back... He was always yelling at me for not working hard enough.

"Stay focused!" Ada yelled angrily, causing Nick to lose his balance.

Nick had a perfect understanding of his height and weight, which made him very skilled in close combat. This allowed him to immediately notice the change in his weight after the spell and adjust his senses accordingly, but losing focus for a moment overwhelmed him with a feeling of awkwardness.

"This is hard," Nick admitted.

"Try it again," Ada instructed.

"All right."

It had been a long time since Nick had undergone a training experience like this. Ada's strict teaching style brought back old memories.

Nick's instructor was Argus, the leader of Combat Masters. Argus's training was harsh, but he was a kind man. His mastery of all forms of martial arts allowed him to defeat monsters without the gift of magic or the natural strength of beast people. He had no shortage of people offering to pay for his instruction, but instead, he elected to take in a boy with no relatives and teach him. That was the kind of charitable person he was.

Nick recalled a conversation he'd had with Argus shortly after the death of his parents.

"If you take after your parents, you're going to be short and struggle to build muscle," Argus said.

"Okay," Nick responded, unsure of what Argus was getting at. His parents had just been killed by thieves, and he figured the man wanted to discuss his future plans.

"You're not suited for a longsword."

"Okay."

"I could teach you how to use a lance, but that's a weapon made

for the battlefield. It's not very useful in a labyrinth. It'll serve you if you become a knight or a soldier, though. You could make a decent living."

"I don't want to be a knight."

"Then this will do," Argus said, handing him a dagger. "Think of it as an extension of your limbs."

Nick's father had never carried any large weapons, either, but he wasn't weak. He'd even killed some thieves in his life. Nick felt confident as he spoke to Argus that he would be able to become strong like that, too. Rather, he had no other choice.

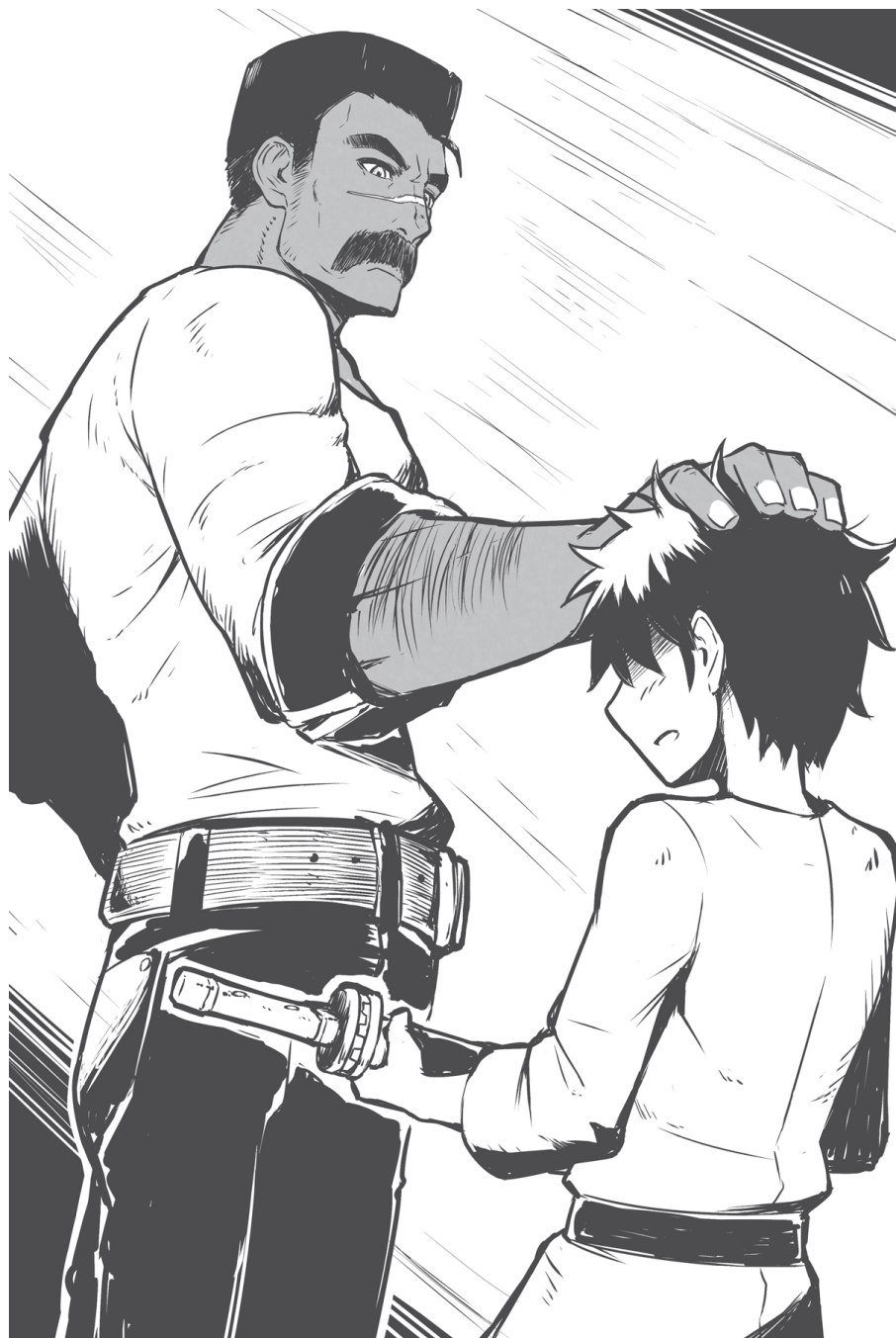
"Yes, sir," he responded.

Nick had used the dagger Argus had given him that day on countless adventures. It was broken now, but he still held on to it and treasured it. He kept that a secret from his current party members.

"Don't call me sir," Argus scolded.

"Huh?" Nick responded.

"I expect you to behave yourself, but if you're joining my party, I want you to drop the formality."



“Why?”

“Because we’ll be fighting together. That makes us equals. It might be hard for you to see us that way, but that just means you have to work hard to catch up.” Argus ruffled Nick’s hair.

Nick trained hard for three years after that day. He ran, built his strength, increased his flexibility, ate nutritious food, and sparred with his dagger and barehanded as well, all the while performing various chores for Combat Masters. Nick had dedicated himself to Argus’s teachings.

“Build your strength but stay loose while fighting.”

“Be conscious of your breathing.”

“Your training never ends.”

“Work on that until it becomes second nature.”

“Don’t strain yourself.”

“Stay disciplined.”

Nick heard those words so often they had been carved into the back of his mind. Their paths had diverged, and while Nick no longer regretted leaving Argus’s party, he still respected the man as an instructor.

“I can’t believe this...,” Karan said with admiration in her eyes.

“You’re amazing, Nick!” Reina shouted, surprised.

Nick had been training for a while with his mind free of intrusive thoughts. Just like with his time training with Argus, he did his best to put Ada’s words into practice so that the techniques became second nature. The fruits of his efforts were already showing.

“I didn’t expect you to make this much progress in half a day. Even I’m impressed,” Ada said with a sigh as she watched Nick standing atop the clothesline. Nick jumped down and landed as softly as a cat.

“I’ve still got a ways to go. If I don’t concentrate, the spell breaks, which means I’d have a hard time in a fight,” Nick responded.

“You don’t need to use it all the time. That just makes it easier for your opponent to send you flying.”

“So I’ll need to constantly activate and deactivate it throughout the fight? That sounds even harder.”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get there with practice. Using it in battle becomes easy once you get used to the shifts in your weight.”

“That’s what you did?”

“Yeah. You can work at this spell as you go about your day. I recommend you do it every time you walk. That’s how I got good at it.”

“Sounds like it just takes practice. I’m glad it’s easy.”

“It takes a lot of time to get as good as the Steppingman, though it sounds like you have a plan to make up for that... Let’s call it here for today. I’m tired, too.”

“Sorry to make you do this as you’re recovering.”

Ada muttered her agreement and entered Anemone Alehouse through the back door. She asked a clerk if there were any suspicious customers; it seemed she still intended to act as a bouncer despite her injury.

“Nick,” Karan called out before throwing him a wet towel. He let it drape over his head instead of catching it with his hands. The coolness of the towel felt refreshing against his flushed skin.

“Thanks,” Nick said.

“That was amazing. You looked like the Steppingman.”

“No, I’m not that good yet. Using it freely in combat is gonna be really hard. They must be a master.”

“But we know they’re not invincible.”

“That’s right.”

No matter how strong someone is, they can still lose. The Steppingman was just as capable of failure as they were. There were positives to the limitations of humankind.

“Do you wanna learn the spell, too, Karan?”

“Hmm... She said it’s hard for burly races like dragonians. I’ll stick to my strengths.”

Karan had spent time with Reina while Nick trained. He saw her give the girl a ride on her shoulders so she could wave to him when he was on the clothesline, and the two worked together to help prepare food that would be served at the bar. She was surprisingly good with children.

“You really like kids,” Nick said.

“Is that weird?” Karan responded, blushing.

“No, I didn’t say that. It’s a good thing.” Nick laughed and used the towel to wipe off his sweat. It was his first good workout in a while. He enjoyed taking time to free his mind and train.

“She’s a good kid,” Karan said.

“Yeah. She’s reckless, though. I think she’s too innocent for this place.”

“There’s something off about the children around here. It’s kind of scary.”

“They’re cunning little buggers. Take your eyes off them for one second and they’ll pickpocket you.”

Many of the children in the southeast district of Labyrinth City worked. Some served as apprentices at bars and shops, and others assisted adventurers by carrying bags and running errands. There was only so much money a child could make, though, and so many of

them turn to theft.

The only way to get better at stealing was with actual practice, and not all children were good at it. Some were morally opposed despite having a knack for it, while others were drawn to it despite having no talent. It was the latter category who had made it easier for the Steppingman to operate without being discovered. The criminal didn't have to do anything for those children to cross the line and put themselves in danger.

Reina had managed to remain pure despite growing up in such an environment, even if she did tend to rush headlong into danger without much thought. She worried about her mother's behavior, but never doubted her love and ability to protect her.

"Zem has it rough if he even freezes up around kids like her," Nick said.

"Yeah... It's too bad."

"Yep."

Nick hoped Zem would overcome his phobia eventually, but given how much little girls seemed to like him, it wasn't going to be easy. This likely wouldn't be the last time this issue caused him trouble. He might have needed his trauma for his own protection. Karan's bitter smile matched Nick's; they were probably thinking the same thing.

"I'm sorry about Zem," Reina said.

"Oh, you could hear us?" Nick responded. They turned around to find her behind them.

"I didn't know I was causing him so much trouble."

"Ah..."

"I want to apologize to him directly, but I think I'd only bother him."

"That's why you haven't been around much lately."

Reina nodded. She definitely hadn't done anything reckless in a while.

"I'll tell him you apologized. He doesn't blame you, you know. It's just a mental problem caused by his trauma."

"Okay."

"But don't go on any more adventures without an adult," Nick said. Reina hesitated to answer. "Are you worried about your friends?"

"Yeah..."

"I get your desire to protect them yourself and to not rely on others. And to be honest, you have to be careful of who you trust in this world. Most people around here laughed at the rumors of a dangerous kidnapper. There are many who won't hesitate to do bad things such as frame a person for a crime as revenge for being rejected, cheat at gambling, or trick a man into supporting them

financially.”

“There are a lot of bad adults, huh?”

“Yeah. Make sure you keep that in mind.”

Karan snorted with laughter. “Those examples sound familiar.”

“Yeah. They’re all true stories,” Nick replied playfully. Reina responded with a serious nod.

“I know I have to leave this to you all. But I hate not being able to do anything...”

“You remember what Zem said, don’t you? You can return the favor once you grow up.”

“Yeah...”

“You can do whatever you want, including becoming an adventurer, once you’re old enough to judge who you can and can’t trust.”

“Okay.” Reina looked glum as she listened. It seemed like she understood that she shouldn’t get involved.

“Reina, help me out here! The laundry’s getting blown away,” Ada called out.

“Y-yes, Mama!” Reina responded cheerfully, running off to help. Nick felt strangely touched as he watched mother and child work together to retrieve the laundry.

“That goes for you guys, too! Get off your butts and help!” Ada yelled.

“Whoops, sorry,” Nick said. He and Karan joined the other two as they chased after the flying laundry.

Finding the Steppingman



While Nick and Karan hung out at Anemone Alehouse for Nick's training, Zem and the others applied themselves to gathering information. Nick didn't think they would be able to learn much more than Ada already had, but Zem's boastful smile upon his return suggested otherwise.

"Remember how Redd said they fixed a leak in the roof? That gave me a thought. No matter how light the Steppingman is, I doubt they could jump onto rooftops and pillars without leaving any damage," he said.

As always, Zem knew an impressive number of people. He used his connections with various hostesses to speak with carpenters and repairmen, and asked them if they'd had to repair any leaks recently. Nick thought himself to be more worldly than most adventurers—he could even hold his own in Manhunt—but he had to admit he wasn't as skilled as Zem when it came to gathering information.

"I think *you're* the genius detective of the group," Nick said.

"Me?" Zem responded.

"I bet you're always stumbling onto murder cases to solve," Bond joked.

Zem had brought Nick and Bond along on a trek to see if his conjecture was correct.

"I marked the buildings that have suffered roof damage on a map and discovered they occurred most frequently in this area," he explained.

"I guess that makes sense. This is a perfect place for a hideout," Nick responded.

The place Zem brought them to was the entrance to the Garbage Heap, which the Survivors had visited just a few days prior. The

graffiti covering the walls made the area look dirty and gaudy at the same time.

“You didn’t bring the hotties this time? Lame,” the gatekeeper complained.

“I wouldn’t say that to their faces unless you wanna get singed,” Nick responded.

They’d elected not to bring Karan and Tiana for this trip into the Garbage Heap. They were only here to investigate rather than to arrest someone, and they thought bringing too many people would only make their task more difficult.

After Nick paid him, and was about to pass through the gate, the gatekeeper spoke up. “Oh yeah, don’t get in Father Nargava’s way.”

“We know. You told us that last time.”

“It’s even more important now. There’s a bad cold goin’ around, and he’s busy treatin’ all the patients.”

“Got it,” Nick responded with a dubious nod. They walked through the entrance but didn’t get far before Zem stopped. “What’s wrong, Zem?”

“He called it a bad cold, correct?” Zem asked.

“Yeah. Does that worry you?”

“Do you remember the sanctuary that Nargava said he belonged to?”

“Uh... Let me think...”

“He said it was the Sanctuary of Lowell,” Bond answered.

Nick looked confused. “Wait, why would a Lowell priest perform charity work in a place like this? That’s weird.”

“Exactly. It is typically priests from the Sanctuary of Baer that help people in such poverty-stricken areas,” Zem said.

Four gods were worshipped in this land: Medora, the god of providence; Baer, the god of harvest; Virginie, the god of equilibrium; and Lowell, the god of encounters. They were said to have transformed eternally barren terrain into bountiful lands capable of supporting life. All four were equal in the people’s eyes and admired for their virtue as they healed and protected those who lived in their lands. Priests were expected to follow their example and have knowledge of medicine and healing no matter which god they served. However, there were key differences between the gods and their values.

Medora advocated for the importance of wisdom and study. As such, most sanctuaries dedicated to Medora contained a school for the poor and an orphanage. Zem was from one of those sanctuaries.

Baer favored agriculture and livestock farming. Sanctuaries devoted to Baer were knowledgeable about supplying food and were always working to fight famine. It was usually priests under this sect

who distributed food in slums.

Virginie valued order. Sanctuaries dedicated to Virginie made it their mission to rescue people from danger such as bandits or monsters. Many worshippers of Virginie were knights or soldiers, making it the most militaristic of the four sects.

Finally, Lowell governed over meetings between people. Sanctuaries of Lowell mediated peace treaties between warring nations and made sure their contracts and promises were upheld. They played a very important role in the world, but most of what they did was of little concern to ordinary citizens. They also placed importance on encouraging marriage and training midwives, but other sanctuaries did that as well.

Essentially, Lowell priests were slightly more upper-class than those belonging to other sects. They spent a lot of time with diplomats and wealthy merchants and had a reputation for being self-important. According to Nargava, he used to be a Lowell priest.

"The gatekeeper told us not to bother him, but I am curious as to how he ended up here," Zem said.

"Does it seem weird to you as a former priest?" Nick asked.

"Yes, it does. I am hardly one to talk, however," Zem admitted.

"Did anything about him catch your attention when we first met him?" Nick inquired timidly.

"Yes, I found him very interesting, mainly in regard to his pragmatism."

"Really? I thought you'd say..." Nick trailed off, not wanting to be rude.

"That he reminded me of myself?" Zem muttered, finishing the sentence for him.

"You said it, not me."

"Whoops," Zem said, grinning. "It is unlikely he knows anything about the Steppingman, but aside from the possibility that their hideout could be here, we lack any leads. He probably learns a lot about this place through his work."

"Good point. I doubt there are many other people here who would speak to us, anyway."

"Making it to his clinic will be a challenge."

"Hmm-hmm, no need to worry about that. You can leave the navigation to me," Bond said, throwing out his chest proudly. Nick almost responded with an annoyed retort, but he held back. The truth was that Bond was every bit as helpful as he boasted to be. "This way."

"This is a narrow alley... Is there anyone hiding within?" Zem asked.

"There is," Bond responded, putting the other two on guard.

“Relax. There is someone here, but they are only resting under a blanket.”

“Don’t scare us like that,” Nick snapped.

“Although...,” Bond began.

“Is something wrong?” Zem asked.

“Their breathing is shallow. They have a slight fever, and I smell vomit.”

Zem’s expression stiffened. “Do you notice any other symptoms?”

“It seems like they may puke again.”

Zem started forward before Bond finished his sentence.

“Hey, Zem!” Nick called out, and Zem responded without looking back.

“Try not to touch anything, Nick. And cover your mouth with a handkerchief. It would be best to avoid inhaling anything that could make you sick.”

“Okay, but...”

Zem covered his mouth with a cloth and continued walking before Nick could finish. He continued until he found a man on the ground farther down the street. He was under a blanket just like Bond said, but “collapsed” would have been a better word to describe him than “resting.”

“Wh-who the hell’re you...?” the man muttered.

“Show me your eyes,” Zem said, grabbing his head and opening his eyes without waiting for an answer. He was checking to see if they were bloodshot. “I knew it.”

“...Is this what I think it is?” Nick asked.

“It’s yellow demon fever,” Zem said.

The man looked even more surprised than Nick. “Huh... Guess I shoulda expected that. I thought I was feelin’ sluggish. But I ain’t been to any brothels...”

“It can be transmitted through sweat, mucus from sneezing, and blood as well.”

“Wha...? Blood? I ain’t been in any fights lately, and I ain’t slept with no women, either... Who are you anyway?”

The rough-faced man’s speech was slightly slurred, as if his mind was hazy. Zem ignored him and asked more questions.

“How long have you felt sluggish? Do your joints hurt?”

“Since yesterday... That’s when my joints started hurtin’, too. It’s gotten better today.”

“Good. That means you will be fine... But I recommend you find somewhere better to sleep. And find a toilet or a bowl to vomit into,” Zem said as he had the man drink from his flask.

“Th-thanks,” the man wheezed.

“Why have you not gone to see Nargava?” Zem asked.

“Cause there’s a queue. That old guy’ll see anybody, but if the leader of a clique or someone stronger than you jumps the line, there’s nothin’ you can do.”

“I see.”

“I was bein’ careful, too... Dammit,” the man cursed. Zem looked troubled.

“You were being careful?”

“Well, yeah. A lotta people have been gettin’ sick the last couple months. I’ve been too scared to go to a brothel. Not many have died, though. Things have gotten better since Father Nargava started workin’ here.”

“That sounds like an outbreak...”

“Well, it ain’t a deadly virus, at least. You just gotta get through it.”

Zem put a hand to his chin and thought as he listened. “Yes, not many people die from it. But the mortality rate is not zero.”

“D-don’t say that. You’re scarin’ me.”

“You have nothing to worry about. You’re a little skinny, but you seem strong. I am guessing your fever peaked yesterday as well. Is that right?”

The man nodded, surprised. “Yeah...”

“But I imagine some have been less fortunate,” Zem said. The man’s expression turned sour.

“I don’t wanna talk about that... There’s nothin’ we can do about the kids and old folks.”

“How are they faring?”

“How do you think? They’re dying. Their bodies are bein’ carried to a public cemetery,” the man spat.

Zem knew that it wasn’t a pleasant topic.

“Can you tell me more about that?”

But he had to ask the man for more details. The Survivors’ ultimate goal was to find the Steppingman, but this was worth looking into as well. It was possible they might be able to learn more information. Where had the abducted children been taken? Were there any traces of the children in the Garbage Heap? Were they alive, or dead? And if they were dead, where were their bodies?

“Nick. There is somewhere I would like to go after we speak to Nargava.”

“The cemetery, right? That’s fine by me.”

Zem and Nick exchanged serious nods.

They went to Nargava’s clinic next. It was much cleaner than the Bedchamber and the other floors of the Garbage Heap. There was no graffiti or trash on the floor. Nothing could be done about the grime of

the building, but it looked like a proper clinic.

"You're not here as patients, are you?" Nargava greeted them, sounding bored.

"Is that a problem?" Zem asked.

"This room belongs to no one. I just happen to use as my clinic. You can stay as long as you don't interfere with my treatment," Nargava replied, sounding neither cold nor welcoming. He was simply indifferent.

"You're sure doing well for yourself," Zem muttered while looking around. There was a long line of patients in the room. Most of them were either sitting or lying down helplessly. Some displayed symptoms of yellow demon fever, while others were simply injured. The room had the appearance of a field hospital.

"Are you making fun of me?" Nargava grunted.

"No, I did not mean it that way..."

"I would understand if you did. Just look at this place."

"So this is your clinic... It is much quieter than the Bedchamber."

"Of course it is."

"Do you treat everyone yourself?"

"If you can call it that. There's only so much you can do with magic and medicine."

"Allow me to help. I am capable of healing minor wounds," Zem offered, rolling up his sleeves.

"Zem, what're you doing?" Nick asked.

"It's okay, Nick."

Zem's proclamation caused a stir among the patients; they were just as surprised as he was. They had probably never had two doctors before.

"I have noticed there is a yellow demon fever outbreak here," Zem said before chanting a healing spell on an injured patient. The person cheered joyfully as they watched their wound close before their eyes. "Yellow demon fever is a difficult disease to diagnose. I can only tell if the patient's symptoms are at their peak or if they are recovering. If the disease is incubating or is yet to worsen like with Hale, I can only identify it about sixty percent of the time."

"That makes you much better than most."

"I am not as good as you. Are there any tricks you can share?"

"I told you already, the only way to learn is through experience."

"I suppose not, then."

"It wouldn't be such a difficult disease if you could teach someone to diagnose it."

"I am sure the people here are grateful for your presence."

"Mm-hmm."

"Do you plan to continue treating patients here long-term?"

“I’m going to remain until I figure out how to explain my knowledge with words.”

“What do you mean?”

“I want to be able to report how to cure yellow demon fever, how to discover it before the symptoms worsen, and how to avoid catching it in the first place. I’ve been operating on experience and intuition all this time. My goal is to share the skill I have cultivated so that others can treat the disease as well.”

Nargava’s words were full of hope. Yellow demon fever was not always a lethal disease, but an outbreak in a place with many frail and immunocompromised people could wreak havoc. Nargava could save many lives if he achieved that dream. The fatigue shown on his face spoke of the difficulty of his task, however.

“I think that is admirable. But why this fixation on yellow demon fever?” Zem asked.

“It’s not a pleasant story,” Nargava said. He sighed quietly and continued. “I was a high priest at the Sanctuary of Lowell in the capital.”

“A high priest?!” Zem exclaimed.

High priest was one step above Zem’s old rank. The sanctuaries belonging to all four sects—Medora, Lowell, Baer, and Virginie—divided their priests into a hierarchy of high priests, mid-level priests, and low-level priests. A high priest in the capital’s Sanctuary of Lowell had the same influence as a high-ranking noble, putting him in a different world from Zem, who was simply a mid-level priest in a small village.

“Then why...?”

“My daughter died of yellow demon fever.”

Zem didn’t say anything. The disease was typically transmitted through sexual activity. This likely meant his daughter was raped.

“She was such a bright and gifted girl, but she had a mischievous side that she never grew out of. I was strict with her for that reason... But one day, she ran away from home.”

Zem remained silent. He could imagine the tragedy that followed. Nargava noticed his reaction and shook his head.

“She was not raped. She simply tried to help an injured person she encountered and touched their blood.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s okay. It’s only natural to jump to that conclusion. People treated her contraction of the disease as a disgrace,” Nargava said. He spoke quietly, but his fists were clenched. Zem could sense the anger within his words. “I spent a fortune trying to avoid a scandal, but my efforts had the opposite effect. I gained a reputation as a father who couldn’t protect his child. The merchants I had spent years

accommodating betrayed me, and my fellow priests saw an opportunity to excommunicate me. All that was dear to me is gone. I no longer have any desire to live. But... I have regrets."

He whispered the last few words so quietly that he was barely audible.

"So that is why you are treating yellow demon fever," Zem said.

"Well, that is not the only reason," Nargava responded.

"I am impressed. You seem well aware of your own shortcomings."

"I don't need your flattery."

"I am serious... My own immaturity is what got me excommunicated."

"Did you violate the precepts?"

"I did not... Not that you'd believe me."

"Those who break the precepts never tell the truth about what they did."

"Exactly." Zem smiled wryly before continuing. He kept treating patients as he spoke, and everyone in the room listened to their conversation in silence.

"A young girl accused me of sexually assaulting her. The incident might have ended as a simple prank, but my jealous coworkers used the opportunity to brand me as a rapist and a pedophile. They had me imprisoned and eventually excommunicated."

"I see..."

"I have been through a lot since then, but long story short, I have chosen to live freely without concern for the precepts. I drink alcohol, and I even enjoy the company of women."

"Wow, nice goin'," a patient called out.

"I can introduce you to a nice girl," another patient offered.

"That will not be necessary. I already have women I am quite fond of," Zem responded with a cool expression as the patients guffawed.

"Don't you resent that girl?" Nargava asked.

"Oh, do you believe me?"

"I don't know. But regardless of how much is true, I doubt you think well of the person who brought about your downfall."

"Yes, I resent her. Every time I see a little girl of similar stature, I feel like my heart is going to be clawed out of my chest. I don't know what I would do if I ended up face-to-face with her."

"Do you want to punish her?"

"Punish her? No, I'm sure she already received her punishment."

"Huh? Was her lie exposed?"

"No." Zem shook his head. "Those who commit a crime and get away with it have to live with that secret for the rest of their lives. I doubt she will ever be happy. The only way for her to remove the

stain on her soul and put the past behind her would be to confess and repent. That is what I believe.”

“You don’t think those who do wrong can take joy in the fortune they receive from their actions?”

“Well... We recently helped arrest a group of three fraudsters. They all had a decadent air about them. They led miserable lives without any hope for the future.”

“Maybe they only appeared that way because they were caught.”

“I’m not so sure about that. I pitied them even before their arrest. They were cowards who were convinced the only way they could make a living was by cheating other people and breaking the law. They were undeniably frail. The girl who framed me will pay for her faults one day, too.”

“That is not a punishment.”

“Fate will condemn her if people do not. That sounds like a punishment to me.”

The patients hung on Zem’s every word as if what he said applied directly to them. Only Nargava reacted differently. He wore a soft expression.

“Then I will rephrase my question. Do you want revenge?”

“Revenge, huh?”

“Wouldn’t you like to expose her lie, scorn everyone who believed her, and make her suffer twice as much as you have?” Nargava asked, sounding like a grandfather speaking sweetly to his grandson.

“Hmm... I have nightmares when I sleep alone. I am seized by the fear that when I wake up, I will once again be imprisoned in solitude. The thought of that girl who made me suffer likely living free and whispering sweet nothings into someone’s ear makes me want to hang myself.”

“So you do want revenge?”

“No, I am fine as long as I don’t sleep alone. I can avoid that by going to a brothel. One thing I have come to understand after all my suffering is that women make very good company.”

A few seconds of startled silence passed before the room exploded with laughter.

“D-did he just say that?!”

“It took you that long to realize the value of women?! I was chasin’ after girls before I turned ten! Ah-ha-ha!”

“He said that so seriously! Ow, my side...”

Nargava looked at Zem with bewilderment. Even he, with everything he’d been through in his life, didn’t know what to think of Zem. He cleared his throat as if to put it out of his mind.

“Be quiet, everyone. You’ll aggravate your injuries. Anyway, tell me why you’re here. You call yourselves the Survivors, right?”

Nargava asked.

“Oh, you know us?” Zem responded.

“How could I not? You won’t find anyone who doesn’t know that name after you all caught Hale,” Nargava jabbed. Zem gave an awkward smile.

“We’re looking for the Steppingman,” Nick said, getting right to the point.

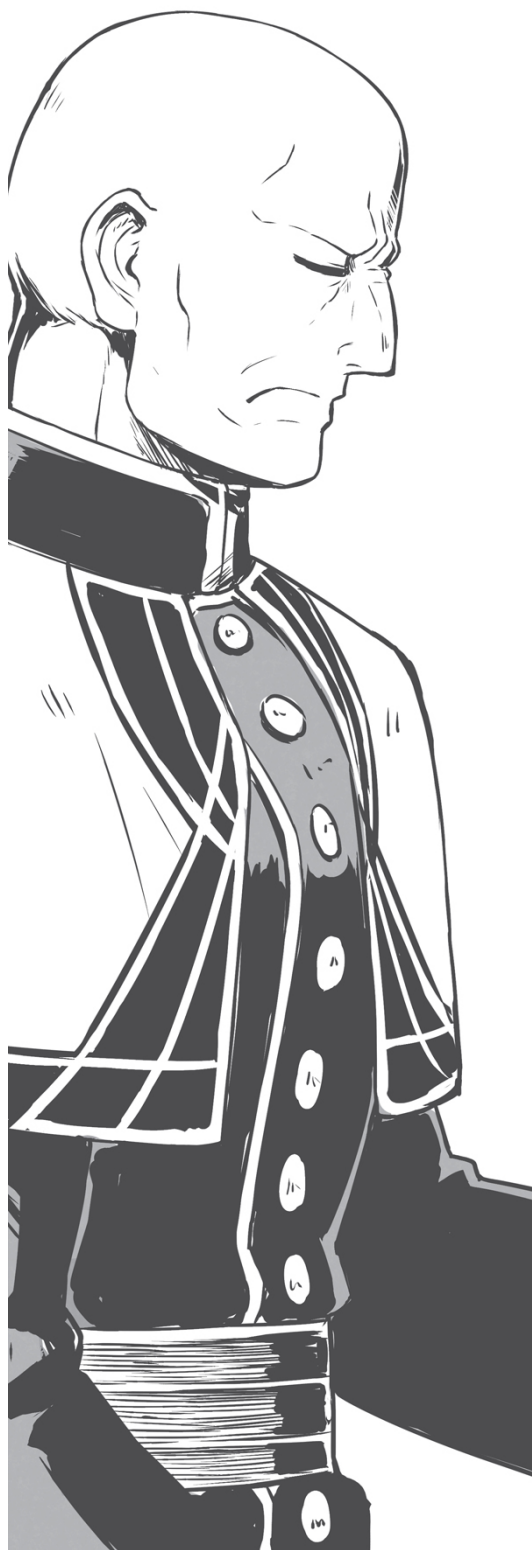
“The Steppingman?” Nargava repeated.

“They’re a criminal who’s been flying around the city at night and kidnapping children. We think their base might be here in the Garbage Heap. Does that ring any bells?” Nick asked.

“I’ve never heard that name. What about you all?” Nargava asked his patients, but they all shook their heads.

“The Steppingman is skilled at earth elemental magic and martial arts, and can easily overwhelm most adventurers in a fight. They use magic chains they can manipulate freely. They’re also using a magic item that hides their features, so we don’t know what they look like.”

“If you don’t even know what they look like, I don’t know how to help you. There are many here who practice martial arts, including me. Plenty of them surpass me in skill. For all I know, the criminal could be in this room. If you ask me, the amount of knowledge you possess makes you plenty suspicious.”



“The difficulty of our task is apparent, isn’t it?” Zem said.

“I don’t want more trouble,” Nargava muttered with a sigh.

“I just noticed something. There are no children in this room,” Zem observed.

“Young children go to the almshouses in Labyrinth City instead of my clinic. I suppose I would treat any who are turned away by such places, though.”

“You don’t seem enthusiastic about the idea.”

“It’s too dangerous. What would I do if a child came here and got sick?” Nargava sounded truly angry. Nick thought he must truly believe this was no place for children, if he was telling the truth. “But if they are abducting children, the Steppingman must be condemned. Such a crime even goes against the moral code of this place. I’ll let you know if I learn anything.”

“Are you sure?”

“I want you to help me out in return. Stay until we’ve finished treating all the patients here.”

“I don’t know...,” Zem said with a wry smile. If you counted the people lying outside in the hallway in addition to the crowd in the room, there were over fifty patients. “Well, I have already begun treatment. Though I can’t help but feel like I’m being used.”

“You’re an interestin’ doctor. You should become Father Nargava’s assistant,” a patient said.

“Working as an adventurer suits me better,” Zem responded, but he applied himself enthusiastically to treating the patients. He gave Nick and Bond orders to help out as well.

“Treat the injured patients. I’ll handle the ones with colds and yellow demon fever,” Nargava ordered.

“Okay.”

Helping Nargava didn’t take as long as they expected. Most were either able to be treated with a simple healing spell, or were in a state where there was nothing Nargava and Zem could do beyond perform first aid.

Once they finished treating everyone, they began to clean up, and Zem turned toward Nargava. “Do you like children?” he asked.



Nargava closed his eyes and answered in a near whisper. "I loved my daughter."

Nick, Zem, and Bond headed deeper into the heart of the Garbage Heap after leaving Nargava's clinic.

"What business do you all have in this depressing place?" a timid-looking man wearing tattered clothing asked suspiciously.

They had entered a spacious area that was free of graffiti and cleaner than Nargava's clinic, despite its original intended purpose as a waste disposal site. No one used it as a stronghold, and for good reason—it had become a public cemetery and a morgue for the residents of the Garbage Heap. It was maintained out of the small amount of goodwill the people here had left.

"Could you show us around? You're the gravekeeper, aren't you?" Nick asked.

"This is no place for guided tours. You'll upset the ghosts," the man complained.

"Ghosts are a type of monster. They will not appear in even the eeriest of graveyards unless there is mana present. Did you not know that?" Bond explained innocently.

The man looked like he was on the verge of losing his patience. "That's not what I meant. I just don't want you to do anything that'll get you cursed."

"Oh, that's no problem. I swear we won't," Nick responded.

"I swear as well. It is a good idea to be careful," Zem said.

"Very well. I will vow, too," Bond said.

The man they were speaking to was the gravekeeper. That might have made the place sound like a proper cemetery, but in truth, it didn't resemble the ones built next to sanctuaries. The graves were nothing more than piles of wood and stones. The residents of the Garbage Heap paid him a small amount to help with burying the dead, chasing away crows and stray dogs, and taking care of the corpses until they were cremated.

"Anyway, this is the grave we use for children who pass away," the gravekeeper said, pointing at a waist-high stone.

"There's only one?" Nick asked.

"We burn the bodies of children we don't know the names of using Sacred Fire and add them to the same grave. I feel bad for them, but...what else can we do?" he responded, dropping his voice to a barely audible whisper at the end.

Sacred Fire was a spell used to burn a body placed in an iron coffin and reduce it to bones. This was to avoid burying corpses that could potentially pollute the soil. It would be an efficient use of mana

and time to regularly use this method to burn multiple corpses at once, but relatives of the deceased would never allow that at a normal funeral, even if it meant they had to pay a small amount of money to have their loved one buried alone. Dead bodies were only ever grouped together if many died at once because of an epidemic, natural disaster, or war, or if the dead had no family.

"I just got a recently deceased girl, too. She hasn't been cremated using Sacred Fire yet... It sucks being poor," the man said.

Nick, Zem, and Bond shared a look. They felt like they might have found a lead. Nick did his best to keep a straight face, not wanting to let his excitement show in a cemetery.

"Really? Then please take this," Zem said, taking a gold coin out of his wallet and giving it to the gravekeeper. The man made a troubled expression.

"You have no reason to pay me if you don't live here," he said.

"Do you not accept donations?" Zem asked.

"I want your money, but if I got donations, the residents here would stop paying me. I'm grateful whenever people distribute food here or offer medical care, but we need to manage the cemetery by ourselves. Receiving outside help would only cause problems."

"Sounds rough," Nick said, looking conflicted.

"It's not too bad. Father Nargava made my life easier recently by lending me a magic item."

"What kind of magic item?"

"One that casts Chillwind. Corpses rot if you leave them out on hot days, so I use it to cool the air. They still need to be cremated with Sacred Fire as quickly as possible, though."

"Wow. He's a charitable man," Nick said, impressed.

"The father lives here, so I have no qualms with relying on him. We have a give-and-take relationship—I can count on his support as long as he's here, and he can count on me to dispose of the patients who die during treatment. That said, I won't accept help from an outsider. The Garbage Heap would collapse if that cycle was broken."

"My apologies. I did not mean to upset you," Zem said.

The gravekeeper stared wistfully at the gold coin. "Gold coins sure are nice, though... The average coin just doesn't shine quite like this." He stroked it regretfully and tossed it back to Zem. The man was oddly both calculating and noble. Nick wondered if all gravekeepers were like that.

"I have a question. Was the girl who just died a resident of this place?" Nick asked.

"I think so. No idea who she was, though. I submitted a report to the Sun Knights and even they couldn't figure it out. But if you ask me, I doubt the Stepperman is using this place to dispose of corpses,"

he answered.

"I suppose we were wrong," Zem responded.

"Yeah," Nick said. They shared a dejected look.

"But I am still glad we came. I would like to offer a prayer as we investigate. I am no longer a priest, but I still know the rites," Zem said.

"That's fine with me, but... You're adventurers, right? Or bounty hunters? I don't know what you guys do for a living, but don't try to rob any graves," he warned.

"Oh come on, man! Like hell we'd do that!" Nick yelled angrily. The gravekeeper looked like he was about to cry.

"S-sorry. Grave robbers do exist, you know. I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't give that warning."

"Oh, okay... Sorry for snapping at you."

"The corpses are placed in coffins and stored in that morgue. I'll unlock it for you."

The gravekeeper pointed toward a small brick shed. It looked plain but surprisingly sturdy. The doorknob was held shut with giant chains and a lock.

"Rich or poor, we all end up the same when we die...," Nick muttered, and Bond nodded.

Bond looked at the shed and strained his eyes. His detection ability was so advanced that as long as the structure was close enough, he could see through its walls.

"There is a child's corpse in there, just as the man said."

"Do you think she could be one of the abducted kids? The gravekeeper was pretty sure they weren't," Nick asked.

"I do not know, either... What is the plan?" Bond responded.

"I'd rather not have all three of us examine the corpse...," Nick said.

"I don't want to as well, but it would be unfair to leave it entirely to Zem."

"I do not mind handling it, but... I am afraid the girl's corpse may trigger my trauma," Zem admitted.

"I didn't think about that... Well, there's nothing for it. We'll do it together," Nick said.

If the children the Steppingman was abducting were dead, they had to figure out how and why they were being killed, no matter how unpleasant it might be. They could even find a clue pointing to the criminal in the process. Nick understood that, but whether he could get himself to study the corpse of a child was another matter.

"It's not fair that Karan and Tiana get to miss this. Right, Bond?" Nick asked.

"Nick. Something is wrong," Bond said.

“What is it?”

He held up a finger and urged Nick to be quiet.

“Hi-yah!”

Someone swooped down at him from above with no warning, aiming to kick him in the head with what looked like the force of a falling boulder.

“Wha...?!” Nick gasped, just barely dodging it. The assailant immediately hounded him with a ferocious string of attacks. They seemed to be barehanded, but their loose, long-sleeved jacket hid their arms completely. The hood of their jacket also concealed their face. They unleashed another blow that felt as fast as lightning.

“Tch... *Light Body!*” Nick chanted, using the spell he had just learned. The assailant’s attack was so fast, he had no other choice. As agile as Nick was, he had to admit they were a more skilled fighter than he was. He reduced his weight right before the blow landed and used the impact to help propel himself backward.

“Hmph... You must actually be the Stepperman if you can use that spell,” the assailant said.

“Huh?! *I’m* the Stepperman? You’re the one sneaking around and hiding your face!” Nick fired back, suppressing his excitement at getting the spell right on his first attempt in battle. He kicked off a wall and jumped around like a grasshopper to confuse the enemy, then swung his dagger for a powerful blow from outside their field of vision.

“Too slow!”

“Wha...?!”

The hooded figure thwarted his attack perfectly. They did not block his dagger with a blade or shield, but instead by wrapping their sleeves around Nick’s wrists like whips. The move rendered Nick immobile.

“You look young. You would have had a bright future had you not chosen a path of evil. What a shame. Prepare yourself!”

“Path of evil?! You’re one to talk! Wait a second, I’ve heard your voice before!”

“Save your excuses for court!”

The strange assailant assumed a fighting stance. Nick felt a sense of dread; his intuition told him they were preparing to attack with a strength he wouldn’t have thought possible, given their smaller stature. He was going to be badly hurt if the attack connected. Fortunately, Bond jumped between them.

“Oh right, you have allies,” the assailant said.

“Going after the leader first is not a bad strategy, but you should not have forgotten about us!” Bond shouted.

He swung his sword down, but the assailant kicked him with the

strength of an ax swing, knocking him out in one attack. Two more Bonds attacked them from the left and right; he had used his special move, Parallel, and had one copy of himself act as a decoy. Nick couldn't believe what he saw next.

"*Parallel*," the enemy chanted, splitting into multiple bodies just like Bond. Their copy defeated the two Bonds in seconds, then disappeared. "Geez, that consumes a lot of mana without a contractor present... But I foiled the ace up your sleeve!"

They once again assumed their fighting stance, preparing to hit Nick with everything they had.

"Wait. I surrender," Nick announced.

"Huh?" the enemy said, confused.

"I know you're stronger than me. I admit defeat."

"That was surprisingly easy... Are you really the Steppingman?"

"I think there's a misunderstanding here... But this calls for an apology first."

"I don't need one—," the assailant said.

"No, I'm not apologizing to you. *We* need to apologize to *them*."

"What?"

Nick ignored the hooded person's bewilderment and removed the cloth he was wearing over his face. The assailant tilted their head.

"Umm... You're Nick, right?" they asked.

"Yeah."

"And just to make sure... Are you the Steppingman everyone's been talking about?"

"Of course not."

An awkward silence fell between them before the person realized their mistake and blushed deeply. "Ohhh! I was all ready to catch you after you chased me out of the guild! Whoops!" they shouted, removing their hood. It was Olivia, the magazine reporter who'd made a scene and fled from Manhunt.

As Olivia held her head in her hands, two people Nick had been watching approach finally reached them. It was Zem and the gravekeeper.

"What is wrong with you guys? Do you have rocks for brains? This is a cemetery," the gravekeeper scolded, sounding fed up.

"Sorry," Nick said.

"My apologies," Zem said.

"I am sorry," Bond said.

"I feel terrible," Olivia mumbled.

The four of them got down on their knees and apologized to the gravekeeper.

"Don't *ever* do that again! Stay on your knees and reflect on what

you've done!" he yelled before walking away. Nick only stood up when the gravekeeper was out of sight.

"Good call, Zem."

"It was nothing," he responded. When the hooded figure, who turned out to be Olivia, attacked Nick, Zem quickly decided he would only get in Nick's way if he tried to join the fight. As such, he went to get help instead. "It was painful turning my back on a party member, but there isn't a more effective strategy than this when fighting a human opponent."

"Don't worry about it. It all worked out in the end," Nick said.

The old Zem probably would have tried to assist Nick in combat by grabbing his mace or casting support magic. That would have been effective if they were fighting a well-known monster in a labyrinth, but a skilled human opponent would only find him too predictable and use him to hamper Nick. That was what happened the first time they fought the Steppingman. Faced with a similar crisis this time, it was clear what the best choice was.

"The gravekeeper has a lot of influence here. He can ban you from the cemetery if you offend him, and harming him would make an enemy of everyone in the Garbage Heap. That would be problematic for both of us, I'm sure," Zem explained.

Olivia raised a hand as if in surrender. "That was a dirty move... But you are not trained in martial arts. You win."

"All right, let's find somewhere better to talk. Who are you, anyway?" Nick asked.

"I told you, didn't I? I'm a magazine reporter," Olivia answered.

"Oh, please. Don't play dumb."

"Umm... Don't be scared, okay?"

"Okay."

"To be perfectly honest, I'm a Steppingman. People called me that once in the past," Olivia said shyly.

"Excuse me?" Nick responded, unable to hide his surprise.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I have nothing to do with the one who has become known as a kidnapper. 'Steppingman' is essentially a nickname for mysterious people who jump across rooftops by night. It doesn't refer to any one person."

"Huh... I had no idea. So there's no guarantee that a former Steppingman is the same person as the kidnapper going around now."

Olivia giggled boastfully. "Being able to use Light Body makes you a Steppingman, too."

"This is the first I've ever heard of there being more than one," Bond commented, sounding very interested.

"Since I'm also a Steppingman—does that make us Steppingmen? Whatever—and even I have trouble using it sometimes," Olivia said.

“You weren’t the first Steppingman, were you?” Nick asked.

“Nope. I learned Light Body from some training in the past, and one day I was spotted using the rooftops to flee from some trouble. People started calling me by that name after that. It was during the time of Labyrinth City’s third occult fad.”

“Never heard of it... So is that why you ran from Manhunt?” Nick asked.

Olivia laughed weakly. “You scared me. I didn’t expect you to correctly guess from out of nowhere that I’m a Steppingman.”

“I didn’t actually know. I was just baiting you to see how you’d react.”

“Oh man... I didn’t even need to run. I made all the guild employees mad. Can you come with me to apologize?”

“That sounds like a pain... Just go to reception and tell them you’re sorry,” Nick said, looking annoyed.

“Will that really work? I’ve been using my connections to find the current Steppingman and clear my name. Do you want to hear what I’ve learned?” Olivia asked.

“Like what?”

“Hmm... Have you fought the Steppingman directly?”

“Yep.”

“You can’t remember what they look like, right? There’s a reason for that—they’re using a magic item that prevents people from discerning their features. There’s a trick to dispel that, but you’ll have to pay up to hear it.”

“You say their name. You can strengthen your senses and stop the phantom king orb from working if you figure out their identity.”

“Grrr... How do you know that?! I only learned that after spending *forever* reading ancient texts!” Olivia whined, but Nick ignored her.

“That trick is useless unless we have their name, though. That’s why we’re trying to figure out who they are.”

“Hmm, that makes sense.”

“I have a question. Why have you been spending so much time here?”

“Because of something I heard from Nargava.”

“You talked to him, too? Do you know him?”

Olivia nodded. “I’ve spoken to him for an article before. You know how the people he’s unable to save are sent straight here? He asked me to protect them from any body snatchers in exchange for agreeing to talk to me.”

“Body snatchers?”

“Yeah. He said that a lot of kids have been getting abducted lately, and that the culprit might even go after dead bodies. He also

told me they could use this place to dispose of their victims, and that I should be careful around any new faces.”

“Hmm...”

“And that gave me an idea: This would be the perfect hideout for a nasty crook like that. There would be no better place for this Steppingman. I thought I could catch anyone suspiciously loitering around here and clear my name by taking them to the guild. That’s two birds with one stone!”

“Sorry for falsely accusing you.”

“I’ve been waiting forever for a priest to come and perform Sacred Fire. But I couldn’t give up and go back to the guild without them trying to arrest me. Geez, I’ve never felt more like a Steppingman than I do now.”

“I think I get the picture,” Nick said, nodding.

“Hold on. We aren’t done here,” Bond interjected. “Why are you able to use Parallel?”

“I could ask you the same thing. You can maintain it for much longer with multiple copies. That’s way more suspicious. It’s a really advanced ancient spell,” Olivia replied.

“Grk.” Bond appeared to instantly regret his question. “Uh... I deciphered some ancient texts, I guess...”

“That’s not something you can learn by just reading.”

“Then why can you use it?”

“We’re going in circles.”

They both fell silent.

“Let’s drop that topic!” Bond suggested.

“Good idea!” Olivia responded cheerfully.

“Hold on, guys,” Nick interrupted, unable to handle the hypocrisy. “Do you really want to leave it there, Bond?”

“I’m fine with it. It’s water under the bridge, as far as I’m concerned. We seem to want the same thing.”

“Yeah, let’s work together to catch the Steppingman!” Olivia said, pumping her fists in the air. Nick looked at her doubtfully.

“What should we do, Zem?” he asked.

“It sounds good to me. We could certainly use the help,” Zem replied, sounding surprisingly unconcerned.

“Really?”

“Olivia. You said you thought we were body snatchers or that one of us could be the Steppingman, right?” Zem asked.

“Well, yeah.”

“To tell the truth, we are here for the corpse in that morgue. We are hoping it will provide a lead in the search for the Steppingman. Would you like to clear your suspicion of us by investigating together?”

“Huh?” Olivia said blankly. It seemed like she wasn’t expecting that.

“You can watch us investigate the body to make sure we don’t steal it. You can even hold a weapon and attack us the moment you think we are doing something suspicious. Or do you always fight barehanded?” Zem asked.

“W-wait a second! I, um...” Olivia looked at him, Nick, and Bond in turn. Zem’s expression didn’t change.

“I was nervous about doing it with just the three of us. We’d appreciate the help,” Nick said.

“Yes, having another person will make this much easier,” Bond added.

They both looked like bad influences roping a friend into a dangerous activity.

They entered the morgue, which was frigid because of the magic items being used to cool the air. The gravekeeper must have cleaned the shack regularly, as the inside was quite tidy. There was one coffin in the room.

“I am going to open it,” Zem announced. He reached out and slowly slid off the lid to reveal the dead body of a little girl. Air even colder than inside the room gushed out—there were more magic items inside.

“What do you see, Zem?” Nick asked.

“Nothing unusual...,” he responded. He calmly inspected the body, his trauma not seeming to bother him.

“Nothing at all? Seriously?” Olivia inquired.

“Um... Yes,” Zem said.

“Describe her face to me in detail,” Olivia requested.

“There is not much to say... She has two eyes and a nose, just like anyone else... Hmm?” Zem tilted his head curiously. “Actually, something is strange. No one should look so ordinary.”

“What’re you doing, Zem?” Nick asked.

Zem finished examining the corpse and began to inspect the coffin. He lightly tapped the sides and felt around the lid.

“Nick, can you help me lift her body? I want to look at the bottom of the coffin.”

“Got it. Grab her legs, Olivia.”

“Roger that,” Olivia responded.

The two lifted her body.

“...There it is,” Zem said, discovering something at the bottom of the coffin that was being hidden by the girl’s body. It looked like a wood chip but was actually some kind of gem.

“What’s that?” Nick asked. It looked like a piece that had been

broken off a circular gem.

“That is another magic item,” Bond answered.

“That’s right. I think it’s a fragment of a phantom king orb. It’s producing a weak illusionary effect to interfere with our perception. It must be part of the phantom king orb’s power,” Olivia added.

“What?!” Nick shouted, shocked.

“Similar to vessels, orbs are magic items that can be filled with mana. The mana held within can either be combined with another magic item to create a weapon or used to strengthen oneself... And there is also a third, forbidden use,” Olivia explained casually.

“You mean breaking it like this?” Nick asked.

“Bingo. You can break an orb into multiple pieces, but it will eventually lose its functionality. An orb can be refilled with mana and used again when it’s intact, but once broken, it can no longer receive mana.”

“So you’d only use it that way if you don’t care about ruining the orb.”

“An item as rare as a phantom king orb could sell for something ridiculous like one billion dina if unbroken. Who in their right mind would throw that away...?” Olivia mumbled in disbelief.

“That means the one the Steppingman is using now has an expiration date. Do you think it’ll stop working soon?” Nick asked.

Olivia shook her head. “No. It’ll become a useless stone eventually, but the mana won’t run out for a while. It could last from six months to a year if the culprit is conservative with it.”

“Guess it wasn’t gonna be that easy...,” Nick muttered.

“The orb is important, but let us think about the girl first,” Zem said. Nick and Olivia agreed. “The gravekeeper mentioned that even the Sun Knights could not figure out her identity. I think we can now assume the orb fragment is responsible for this.”

“Yeah. The question is, why would the Steppingman do this? And who is this girl? She’s not just some nobody,” Nick said.

“Exactly,” Zem agreed.

“Man, this orb has been such a pain in the ass,” Nick cursed.

They all looked at the girl. She had a perfectly generic human face, but such a thing should not exist. That could only mean one thing—the orb fragment was erasing the girl’s defining features from their memories. It felt unspeakably cruel.

“I’m going to destroy the fragment. That should cause its minimal magic effect to vanish,” Olivia said.

“Go ahead,” Nick responded.

Olivia squeezed her hand to crush it. As soon as she did, the girl’s features and body started to become more defined. She had long and sleek blond hair and was wearing a dress that was too elegant for a

commoner. She looked like a lower-ranking noble or a merchant's daughter. It was clear she wasn't a resident of the Garbage Heap.

"Let's figure out who she is," Nick said, gently patting the girl's head.

The Survivors once again gathered at Anemone Alehouse. Ada and Redd were there, but Reina was not, given the late hour.

"How in the world did you end up using this place as your base?" Olivia asked in disbelief. She had joined them as well.

"Don't worry about it. It's no weirder than you working as a magazine reporter," Nick replied crankily.

"You all look exhausted," Tiana said.

Nick sighed loudly in response. "Exhausted doesn't begin to describe it. We just went through a lot."

"Yeah, it was terrible!" Bond exclaimed.

They both pouted and leaned back against the sofa. Tiana gave a strained laugh and turned to Zem.

"Was it really that bad?" she asked.

"I suppose it was...", he said with a wry smile. His voice oozed fatigue.

"What'd you guys do, Tiana?" Nick asked.

"We went over the information on the missing children again. We asked Reina for more details and got the guys at Manhunt to help us out," Tiana responded, producing a stack of papers. She had compiled detailed data about the missing children, including their names, appearances, and when they had possibly disappeared. She had also summarized the information Ada had uncovered about the Steppingman's movements.

"I'm impressed you were able to make these documents without anyone teaching you how... You're a natural bounty hunter," Nick complimented.

"She was amazing. Everyone at the guild admires her and calls her Lady Tiana. They all helped her gather information," Karan said. She and Nick looked at Tiana with awe.

"What do you mean, I'm a 'natural'?! And I'm not a noble anymore!" Tiana shouted.

"You just have an aura that demands respect. Anyway, I have something I wanna show you. Are you ready, Bond?" Nick asked.

"Almost... There we go," Bond said as he finished drawing a picture. It was a sketch of the little girl they'd found in the morgue.

"Wow, you're good at drawing... Do you moonlight as a courtroom sketch artist?" Redd asked.

"Hmm-hmm, this is child's play," Bond responded with a boastful smile. He continued to touch up the drawing.

"Can you add color, Bond?" Tiana asked.

"I don't have any paint."

Redd stood up and addressed the bar's employees. "Hey, does anyone have paint? Lipstick might work. No, that would be a waste. Oh, you have tattoo ink? Can you draw with that?"

The workers searched the bar and fished through their bags. One of them who painted for a hobby generously lent Bond the tools he needed. Bond's androgyny made him very popular at Anemone Alehouse.

"Okay... This is what she looked like. She had long and straight blond hair, slim yet strong eyebrows, pale skin, and a mole on her neck," Bond said after adding color to the sketch, making it look even more realistic. Tiana studied it seriously and shuffled through her pages on the missing children.

"...She could be Martha Canning. She was born into the family that owned Canning Company, which operates an armor store on Blacksmith Street. She was ten years old. She had long blond hair, a mole on her neck, and a burn mark on her left wrist. She had a habit of stealing, despite her family's wealth, leading to two arrests by the Sun Knights for pickpocketing. She had an argument with her parents one month ago after they told her to leave a group of petty thieves, after which she ran away and never returned. This was not her first time running away, so her parents assumed she was at a friend's house and were late submitting a report to the Sun Knights," Tiana read aloud. "Zem, did she have a burn mark?"

"Yes, she did. This means that one of the missing children was placed in the morgue in the Garbage Heap," Zem said.

"So there's no doubt the Steppingman is in the Garbage Heap?" Tiana asked excitedly. Zem's expression had turned grim, however. "Does something feel off to you?"

"No, quite the opposite. This discovery actually narrows the list of suspects considerably," Zem said.

"Do you mean...?"

"Yes. I believe I know who the Steppingman is."

Everyone in the room stared in wonderment at Zem.

"Who is it?" Tiana asked.

"I could tell you now, but... Would you help me find some more evidence first? There's still some information I'm missing to truly back up my reasoning," Zem asked.

"Why not just tell us? Well, whatever. We'll help if you think it's necessary," Tiana said.

"It's time to catch the Steppingman," Nick said.

"Yes, we are almost there," Zem responded quietly, his expression still grave.

“Let’s figure out a strategy to capture them. I’m tired of watching that bastard damage the roofs,” Nick said.

“Maybe you could convince the landlords around here to give you a reward if you catch ’em,” Ada suggested jokingly.

“Now you’re talking,” Nick responded with a laugh.

“It’ll be difficult to keep up with the Steppingman, though. They jump like a rabbit. You’ve learned how to use Light Body, but they’re still better,” Karan said.

“I don’t expect to be better than a pro like them after a week of practice. But I have a plan,” Nick responded.

“What kind of plan?” Ada asked.

“So far we’ve only fought the Steppingman in places where they can move freely, which made escape easy for them. So we’re gonna change our approach. We have to pick a place that’s advantageous for us but disadvantageous for them.” Nick smiled viciously. “Let’s finish this.”

The Survivors vs. the Steppingman



It was a rare night with all three moons visible in the sky. The three were known as Paxia, Audacia, and Veritia. Veritia was the most circular, and it lit the night sky with its gentle gold glow. Paxia was large, but wasn't as popular because of its rough, potato-like surface that was visible on close inspection. Audacia was the smallest and seen the least often. Some were drawn to those imperfections, but most people were attracted by the unrivaled beauty of Veritia.

The winding streets of Labyrinth City were bustling under the light of those three moons. One person raced through the city using their tremendous leaping ability and chains to propel themselves high into the sky, making them look like some kind of eerie, giant insect. This person went unnoticed, however, and no one would have suspected their presence until the moment they sneak up behind someone to claim as their new victim. They were the Steppingman out of Labyrinth City folklore.

"What's the rush? It's a beautiful night. Why not just sit back and admire the moons?" someone said, interrupting the Steppingman with a lightning-fast roundhouse kick. He had short black hair and green leather armor over his thin yet supple body. It was Nick from the Survivors, putting his new ability to practice.

"Hmph... You are inexperienced with Light Body, but your martial arts skill is not bad," the Steppingman said.

"Am I good enough to count myself as a Steppingman?" Nick asked.

They easily blocked Nick's kick and used their chains like a hook to jump onto the roof of a house. Nick jumped after the Steppingman in pursuit.

"What does it matter what you are called? You're a dead man."

The Steppingman entered a fighting stance when Nick landed on the same rooftop. A chill ran down Nick's spine.

"There's one thing that doesn't make sense to me. Why do you keep doing the same thing when we've already figured out your routine? You're obviously a formidable fighter, but you're as sloppy as a magazine reporter rushing to meet a deadline. Or maybe you *do* have some kind of deadline?" Nick said.

The Steppingman answered with their chains, flicking them at Nick as fast as an arrow. Nick eluded them with a sidestep.

"Is that all you have to say before your death?" the Steppingman asked.

"We've got the rest figured out. We know your behavioral pattern, the reason you abduct children, and why you chose the Garbage Heap as your base. Any guesses as to how we managed that?"

The Steppingman responded to Nick's question with a jump leading to a roundhouse kick.

"Walking atop roofs, pillars, and streetlights feels amazing. I thought at first you'd be able to go anywhere. But once you actually try it, you realize it's surprisingly limiting. No matter how good you are with Light Body, it's hard to leap onto or off a roof without damaging it, and one bad step can send you tumbling through headfirst," Nick continued.

He swayed to avoid a kick that appeared sharper than the swing of a sword.

"There are animal trails in the city that squirrels and mice pass through that are also perfect for a Steppingman. Once we paired those with the routes we've seen you take so far, pinpointing your base and your behavioral pattern wasn't hard."



Rather than counterattack, Nick glared at his opponent and let his words do the fighting.

“Now, the reason you abduct children. You need them in your efforts to find the cure for a disease. Is that right?” Nick asked.

The Steppingman thrust their chains at Nick with the force of a gale, and Nick dodged like a cat.

“A mage friend told me recently that she wants to write a thesis and become a sage. I thought that sounded amazing, but it’s surprisingly easy to get a thesis published and form a research society. A group of mages can even get together at a bar and call it a research paper seminar. Did you know that?”

The Steppingman attacked him rather than answering, essentially confirming his accusations.

“But I was still surprised to learn that someone had opened a laboratory in the Garbage Heap and submitted a thesis. What do you have to say to that, Nargava?” Nick asked, emphasizing the name.

The Steppingman stopped and threw back their hood. The man’s features took shape, and what Nick could only vaguely perceive as the shape of a human turned into Nargava, the bald man who’d opened a clinic in the Garbage Heap.

“That’s what I thought,” Nick muttered.

“How did you figure it out?” Nargava asked, glaring at Nick.

“Because the kid we found died of yellow demon fever,” Nick answered bluntly. “You treated her, but the illness advanced too quickly to manage. Correct?”

“Why would I treat a child I abducted? If I was truly concerned for a child, I would not have to kidnap them.”

“I did wonder about that. I thought you might have been the kidnapper’s accomplice, and that your role was to clean up their messes. Maybe they brought the child into the Garbage Heap and forced you to treat them when they got sick.”

“I see.”

“But I guessed wrong. Though I’m not the one who figured that out.” Nick cleared his throat and adopted a theatrical tone. “A highly contagious disease spread inside the Garbage Heap, yet not a single person outside it has gotten sick. As unsanitary as that place is, that doesn’t make sense. The outbreak feels like it was orchestrated... That’s the opinion of an expert we spoke to, anyway. He really needs to stop prefacing his arguments like that...”

“It is proper etiquette to conduct a question-and-answer session. Did you come before me without proper preparation?”

“Like we had time for that.”

Nick cursed internally. He was giving Nargava a chance to attack

as he talked, but the man must have realized what he was doing. *Guess I've gotta rely on that item.* Nick braced himself and continued to speak, searching for the right opportunity all the while.

"You've turned the Garbage Heap into your test site for researching the cure to yellow demon fever. You abduct kids to use as test subjects. Yes?"

Nargava smiled mockingly. "You know nothing."

"What do you mean?"

"First, allow me to compliment you for figuring out my identity. But there are plenty of other places to hide in Labyrinth City. Temporarily dispelling the phantom king orb's effect will accomplish nothing."

"You'd think, right? But phantom king orbs have one fundamental weakness," Nick said, smiling mockingly in return. "They're illusionary magic items that mess with people's perception rather than light and sound. They easily inhibit the minds of people you've never met before, but they have trouble doing the same for those who already know your identity. All we have to do is spread a rumor that you're the one using a magic item to hide yourself, and the phantom king orb will be rendered useless. Even leaving Labyrinth City won't save you after all you've done. Wanted posters will surely spread all throughout the land."



That had been Tiana's reasoning after hearing how they functioned, but they didn't actually have proof. Fortunately, the argument seemed to convince Nargava.

"Interesting... You clearly did your research," he said.

"The orb ceases to function once the illusion has been broken. You should never have confirmed your identity," Nick said.

Nargava looked flustered, but he soon began to chuckle. "I see I've been cornered... Well, that simplifies the situation," he said, once again assuming a fighting stance.

Nick decided this was his opportunity. He resumed speaking, careful not to let the man pick up on his intention.

"Wait a second. It's not every day you get a view like this. It'd be a shame not to take a moment to enjoy it. This might be your last night of freedom. Want a drink?" Nick took a small bottle of alcohol out of his pocket, but Nargava showed no interest. "Yeah, that's what I expected." Nick sighed. He took a large swig and lit a magic igniter.

"What are you doing?!" Nargava shouted.

Nick then spit the contents of the bottle forward, sending a large flame toward Nargava. There was nothing magical about what Nick had done, which was exactly what threw the priest off. He would've sensed an offensive spell before it was cast. Realizing he had been fooled by a street performance trick, Nargava glared angrily at Nick.

"What the...?!" Nargava shouted. Nick was no longer there.

"You thought that was the whole trick? Take this!"

"You're up there?!"

He looked up to see Nick falling toward him to perform a spinning kick with all his might. Nargava crossed his arms and blocked the attack.

"Ngh, you fool! Do you not realize what putting that much weight behind an attack up here will do?!" Nargava yelled.

"That's the whole point. Geronimo!" Nick shouted.

They heard a loud creak below them. Most roofs were not made to support the weight of two people fighting, and this one was no exception. A hole opened beneath them, and they fell into the building.

They fell into a wide, open space.

"This place is a laundromat that went out of business. The company recently went bankrupt after the owner started an affair with an employee and skipped town, but the building's too old for anyone to want to buy. That means we can fight as much as we want without upsetting anybody," Nick explained.

Like he described, it was a deserted laundromat. The floor was

riddled with large, abandoned laundry barrels that looked like dusty witches' cauldrons. Both Nick and Nargava landed lightly despite having fallen over a couple of meters, kicking up a little dust but not as much as they should have. Naturally, neither of them was injured.

"Man, you're good," Nick said.

"That is a basic skill. Shall I give you a much-needed lesson?" Nargava responded.

"I appreciate the thought, but I'll have to pass. Tiana! Karan!" Nick called out.

"Ice Shield!"

"Hi-yaaaah!"

An incantation, a roar, and a crash echoed through the facility. Tiana, who was hiding atop the ceiling beams the lights were suspended from, blocked the hole in the ceiling with a shield of ice and looked down at Nargava. At the same time, Karan threw a metal shelf and trolley to block the exit. She drew her Dragonbone Sword and glared at the priest from a distance.

Luring Nargava here was Nick's plan. He wanted a place where they could neutralize the Steppingman's great leaping ability and prevent him from escaping. Learning how to use Light Body and blowing fire in his face were just a part of his plan.

He'd found the laundromat by pure chance. A few days earlier, when he was thinking of a strategy, Nick had run into Fil, the second girl they'd saved from the Steppingman. They struck up a conversation, and as Fil told him about herself, she mentioned the deserted laundromat her father used to own. When Nick asked if they could use it to take down the Steppingman, she asked them to "wreck the place so badly that Father would never be able to come back."

"The stage is set. Show us what you've got, Nargava," Nick provoked.

Nargava smiled self-deprecatingly upon realizing how perfectly they had manipulated him. "Impressive... It seems I have been trapped."

"Try to run if you want. You can use those chains you're so fond of," Nick said.

Nargava drew his chains back into his sleeves. The building was far from cramped, but he must have realized it was an unfavorable environment. The moment his chains got tangled on anything, the Survivors would overwhelm him.

"I could, but it would be faster at this point to finish you off here," Nargava responded.

"Now that's what I wanna hear... But first, there's one more person I want you to see," Nick said.

Another man emerged from the darkness of the facility to face

Nargava.

“Zem... You were the one who realized it was me, weren't you?”

“Hmm, it's hard to say,” Zem responded.

“Don't play dumb. Though I suppose I am guilty of the same,”

Nargava admitted.

There was an intensity in Zem's eyes that Nick had never seen before.

“Now would be a good time to be honest, then. Why did you start an epidemic? Your daughter died in the capital, not in Labyrinth City. Furthermore, she wasn't murdered. She died from an illness. Are you doing this for some kind of revenge?” he asked.

“Revenge, huh...? That might not be far off the mark,” Nargava said, beginning to laugh for the first time around the Survivors. It sounded almost like a wheeze, which was typical of people who didn't laugh very often. The tinge of insanity in his voice sent a chill down their spines. “You said it earlier, boy. I have been ‘as sloppy as a magazine reporter rushing to meet a deadline.’ That is exactly right. Some infectious disease researchers have shown interest in my thesis. They advised me to find more evidence before our next research paper seminar.”

“Are you serious?” Nick said, his voice trembling with fear.

“I wanted one or two more children to use as test subjects, but acquiring them proved difficult given how busy I am with research and treating patients during the day. You all have caused me more than enough trouble. I welcome this opportunity to get rid of you,” Nargava said, speaking with intense hatred. Nick had seen people display such animosity on a bloodthirsty rampage or out of a desire for glory, but he had never seen it from a person with a motive to kill. “If I find a cure for the illness that killed my daughter, her death won't be in vain. I can give her death meaning and restore our reputation.”

“You killed for that? What nonsense,” Zem muttered.

“Excuse me?!“ Nargava shouted, his anger growing.

“Your daughter's death was a tragedy, made all the worse by being unfairly blamed. But how many lives have you taken for that purpose? I am sure it was not only one or two. Does that not defeat the purpose of researching a cure for an infectious disease?” Zem asked.

“I could not care less about the deaths of some nobodies who must rely on others to survive. They are nothing compared to my daughter.” Nargava looked at Zem, but it was clear from his eyes that he was not in the present. “I...was a bad priest. I have never once cared about saving others like you do, Zem. In my youth, I was a knight who mainly served as a bodyguard, but I got tired of being surrounded by ruffians and blood. One day I happened to save a high

priest on the road and curried favor with him to become a priest myself. I concentrated on my studies and spent my time navigating the politics of the sanctuary, caring for nothing other than my own personal advancement. That was how small a man I was.”

“So you were a knight. That explains your strength,” Zem said.

“My family lacked social standing. I had to work hard to make my place in the world. That was why I wished for success so badly... Until my daughter was born.” Nargava’s tone softened when he mentioned his daughter. “I still remember when she was a baby, and when she started elementary school, like it was yesterday. She was so intelligent. There was no piece of scripture she couldn’t read and recite right away. She even had a gift for magic and could cure a broken finger with ease. Her carefree manner got her in trouble, but her smile was so infectious that even when she got up to her usual mischief, no one stayed mad at her for long. She was talented and so full of love.”

Nargava clenched his fists tight.

“I cannot allow the death of my beautiful daughter to be meaningless!” he shouted.

“That must be why you bought a magic item and hid in the Garbage Heap,” Zem said.

“I acquired the magic item by chance. I had no desire to live... But once I came up with this idea, I had no choice but to go through with it. I suppose I can make up for the deaths I have caused with the lives my efforts will save in the future.”

“What do you mean you had no choice?!” Zem yelled. “I’m sure all the people in this city appear worthless to you! Even the children must look like fools compared to your daughter! But that does not justify the cruel manner in which you are playing with their lives!”

“Trust me when I say no one will miss them.”

“Let’s end this here. If you do not regret your crimes, there is nothing more to say,” Zem declared. Nick, Tiana, and Karan readied themselves.

“Very well. You may even be able to stop me... I apologize for underestimating a group of bounty hunters,” Nargava responded with a heavy sigh. He expelled all the air from his lungs, then took another deep breath. It seemed his breath could knock the old building down. “However... Do not expect me to hold back.”

Nargava looked at them with open hostility. He was finally baring his fangs after using his skills entirely for defense to this point. Nick had only fought a handful of people who were this strong. He felt a level of intensity that reminded him of his experience sparring with Argus, but the circumstances could not have been more different. He always fought Argus with the goal of improving so he would be ready

to face real danger in the future. Argus never held back and had always left Nick battered and bruised in defeat. But this fight was not a practice round. His opponent was a villain who they now knew was much worse than a simple kidnapper—he was like an evil spirit that spread disease. Defeat would mean death.

“Let’s do this!” he shouted.

The Survivors sprang to action.

Just like in their first encounter, Nargava was before Nick’s eyes in a flash. Nick shuddered at the man’s shocking speed.

He seems stronger than when we were on the roof! he thought.

Nargava threw a terrifyingly strong punch at Nick. There was only one explanation for this newfound force—Nargava must have used Heavy Body, the opposite of Light Body, to increase the strength of his attack.

“Yaah!” Nargava yelled.

There was a fine sharpness and weight behind his punches, kicks, and elbows. He could fight monsters barehanded like Nick, but his attacks carried significantly more force. Nick retreated instinctively.

“You’re mine... *Obsidian Blades!*” Nargava shouted.

Nick jumped behind a large iron barrel to avoid Nargava’s spell, but it proved incapable of protecting him completely. The sharp projectiles chipped away at the barrel, and a few scraped Nick’s arms.

“These are stones... And they’re really hard...,” Nick muttered, studying the obsidian arrowheads that had hit the barrel and his arms. Nargava was shooting an endless stream of them from his hands with tremendous force, tearing apart the machinery and floor. Obsidian could be used to make a knife even sharper than an iron sword, but its fragility made it unfit for weaponry. That weakness hardly mattered, though, when producing such projectiles with magic.

“Hraaaah!” Karan shouted, holding her Dragonbone Sword like a shield and charging boldly toward Nargava as the crunch of the arrowheads hitting the floor echoed through the facility. Zem stationed himself behind her.

“Karan, be careful!” Nick shouted.

“I’m fine!” she responded.

When Nargava’s spell ended, Karan sucked in a large breath and expelled flames. Nargava sensed what she was going to do and jumped back to retreat. Zem took advantage of the opportunity to approach Nick and heal him.

“Thanks!” Nick said.

“Don’t let Nargava escape!” Zem shouted.

“Don’t worry. Tiana!” Nick called out.

“I’m on it. Take this!” Tiana yelled from her perch on the ceiling

beams. She took aim at Nargava and cast Ice Spear as he flew backward through the air defenselessly.

“Grr!” Nargava grunted. He produced a rope from his sleeves, wrapped it around a light on the wall, and pulled himself up to change his trajectory. The ice spear passed through the spot where he’d been standing just a moment before.

“What are you, a spider?! *Icicle Dance!*”

“*Diamond Shield!*”

Tiana and Nargava chanted spells at the same time, one firing ice fragments and the other producing a shield to block them. They appeared to be at a stalemate, but Nick realized Nargava was up to something.

“Crap... Move, Tiana!” he yelled.

“I know he has a shield, but I can at least restrain him!” Tiana shouted back.

“That’s not what I mean—he’s going to throw it!”

Nargava threw his shield like a boomerang when Tiana fired the last of her icicles. She dodged it by a hair’s breadth, and the shield broke through the wall of the facility.

“Since when can that spell be used that way?” Tiana grumbled.

“He lulled you into a false sense of security and used his strength to hurl it,” Nick said.

“Ridiculous...,” Zem muttered in disbelief. “What should we do? We could fetch Bond and Olivia...”

“No, they’re our last line of defense in case he gets away,” Nick said.

Bond had positioned multiple copies of himself throughout the southeast district of Labyrinth City in case they incorrectly predicted Nargava’s route. Similarly, they assigned Olivia the role of leading Nargava here in case Nick couldn’t find him. It would be a while before they reached the laundromat.

“We’ll stick to the plan and take care of him here! Let’s go!” Nick ordered.

“Okay!” Karan responded, raising her Dragonbone Sword. She leaped with impressive lightness and swung her sword down.

“Ngh...!” Nargava cast Diamond Shield again to block her attack. Karan’s sword collided with the shield, and she kept pushing with enough force to break it. The floor creaked beneath Nargava’s feet from the weight of the attack. He tossed his shield aside and jumped backward just before the sword reached his neck.

“You’re not getting away... *Fire Dragon Fan!*”

Karan spun and swung her Dragonbone Sword in a powerful sideways sweep, sending flames after Nargava in the shape of a fan. It was a less powerful attack that covered a wide range.

“Hi-yah!” Nargava shouted, diverting the flames with a thrust of the back of his hand.

“Wha...?!” Karan gasped.

“You’re too predictable!” the priest yelled.

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that!” Nick exclaimed, thrusting his dagger at Nargava’s side. He had approached Nargava by hiding behind Karan’s flames.

“Not so fast!” Nargava shouted. He summoned a miniature Diamond Shield in his left palm and used it to block Nick’s dagger. The dagger broke on impact; only a weapon as sharp as the Dragonbone Sword could cut through a Diamond Shield.

“Crap!” Nick yelled.

He tossed his dagger aside and threw a punch. Nick lacked Nargava’s strength, but he thought he might be able to best him with his greater variety of attacks. Nargava fought with a defensive style, combining strengthening and defensive magic, which was expected of knights hired to escort horse- or dragon-drawn carriages and handle attacks from monsters and thieves quickly, or protect someone important while unarmed. That was what Nick inferred from Nargava’s words and from actually fighting him. He knew he needed to hit him hard.

“Oof... You’re pretty good yourself...,” Nargava said, withstanding Nick’s punch.

“What the...?!” Nick exclaimed. An odd feeling spread through his hand after the impact. It was as if he had punched a boulder, or a giant tree in the shape of a human that was firmly rooted in the ground. That didn’t make sense, given Nargava’s medium build. His weight did not match his appearance.

“Hi-yah!” Nargava used Nick’s momentary confusion to counter with a deadly punch. Nick hurriedly crossed his arms to try to block it, but Nargava’s punch was too strong and knocked him off his feet.

“Nick?!”

The other Survivors watched in shock as Nick flew across the room. Nargava hit him so hard, they would not have been surprised if he had been knocked unconscious.

“Grk... I’ll heal him. Cover for me!” Zem shouted.

“Okay!” Karan responded.

Zem rushed toward Nick, and Karan charged at Nargava to protect them.

“Foolish girl! It seems you still don’t understand that such recklessness will get you killed!” Nargava said.

Karan swung her sword with immense speed, but it wasn’t fast enough. Nargava had a huge advantage in agility. He dodged Karan’s attack, then feinted like he was going to chase after Nick and instead

punched Zem as hard as he could.

“Gah!” Zem shouted in pain. The magic-enhanced punch felt as strong as a blow from a mace.

“Damn you!” Karan yelled, burning with rage.

She turned around and rushed at Nargava, but quickly froze. Nargava was cunning, and created a situation where he could attack either Nick or Zem, forcing Karan to abandon one to protect the other. “Crap!” She could have solved the problem by just attacking Nargava, but he gave her no time to think about it.

“Too slow!”

Nargava kicked Karan fiercely. Tiana watched for a chance to attack, but as if he had eyes in the back of his head, he cleverly positioned himself where she might accidentally hit a party member instead. She couldn’t cast a spell unless she was willing to risk hurting an ally. Nargava had them all in the palm of his hand, despite being outnumbered four-to-one.

“A party amplifies the strengths of its individual members, but it can also be taken advantage of in this manner. You’re the weak link, Zem. It’s a shame I have to do this. Our conversation resonated with me,” Nargava said before kicking Zem into the air. Zem healed himself when he landed, then staggered to his feet and glared at Nargava.

“You lied to us when we told you about the kidnappings. You said the Steppingman should be condemned. What could possibly have resonated with you?” Zem asked.

“It was not my intention to lie. I truly believe my actions to be shameful and cruel.”

Nargava rushed at Zem with a cool expression. He dodged an attack from Karan and delivered accurate blows to Zem’s solar plexus, chin, and throat. Nargava was about to kill Zem right before Karan’s eyes.

“No! Stop!” she cried.

“You cannot stop me. You only know how to hunt beasts in caves—that skill does not translate to killing a highly trained fighter. You all chased me down, but you were not prepared to fight me,” Nargava said in a bored tone. Nick surprised him by coiling around his body like a snake. “Wha...? You?!”

“You’re right. This is a manhunt, not a contest of strength. We know we’re finished the moment we engage you in actual combat. But let me show you what I’m really good at,” Nick said. He had quietly crawled toward Nargava while the man was focused on Zem and Karan, then wrapped himself around his legs and used a locking technique. “Your strength and agility are meaningless when I have you trapped like this. I doubt you have much experience dealing with this joint lock. It’s not something a knight would ever use when

fighting off thieves or monsters.”

Nick lifted his legs into the air and wrapped them around Nargava’s neck, making it look like he was doing a handstand as he locked the man in place. Nargava struggled, trying to avoid suffocating, and collapsed. The more he struggled, the tighter Nick’s grip became.

“Did you just try to save me, Zem? Get a grip. Right now, *I’m* the one who’s saving *you*,” Nick said.

“But Nick! You’re hurt!” Zem protested.

Nick looked like he had turned the tables despite being bruised all over. Zem had thought he needed to heal his injuries right away, but Nick was insisting it wasn’t necessary.

“Shut up and listen! Is it so embarrassing to let someone help you?! Or are you looking down on me for trying?! Priests always act all high and mighty, then disparage you behind your back!”

“Nick...”

“Like Nargava said, you’re the weak link right now. You know what you have to do. Calm down and think.”

“You’re right... I apologize. I lost my cool.”

Nargava cried in distress. He was using all his strength to try to crush Nick’s legs and free himself. Trying to interfere with that deadlock would probably only aid Nargava. It was then that Zem decided to relent and entrust the situation to Nick.

“Nick. I need your help. I am going to run, so please buy as much time as you can,” he said.

“What?” Nargava responded, confused.

“I am powerless to defeat you, Nargava. Nick has you trapped right now, but our party has no chance as long as I am here to be taken advantage of.”

“Hmph... So what are you going to do?!”

“I am going to run.”

“Huh?”

“I’m going to go to your clinic in the Garbage Heap and burn it all down. I’ll then reveal everything to those who read your thesis and cause a scandal to ruin your achievements.”

Nargava appeared even more shocked than when Nick had exposed his identity.

“Good-bye, Nargava. I doubt we will ever meet again,” Zem said. He turned his back and ran off.

“Grr... Y-you coward! And you call yourself a priest?! Don’t you realize how many people my research is going to save?!” Nargava shouted.

“I am no more a priest than you are,” Zem responded.

“Nooooooooo!” Nargava screamed in anguish, fighting even harder

than before to break free. Nick didn't feel like he could hold him for much longer, but Nargava had to be close to losing consciousness. He then felt something shift from Nargava's body, and his chains shot out of his sleeves.

"Hraaaah!" Nargava shouted. The chains slithered toward the ceiling, wrapped around a beam, and lifted both Nick and Nargava into the air. The Survivors immediately realized what he was trying to do—he wanted to swing like a pendulum and crush Nick's body against the wall.

"Big mistake, you dimwit! I've been waiting for you to do that! *Freeze!*" Tiana chanted, freezing the chains. Karan sprang forward once they were restrained.

"*Fire Dragon Slash!*" she shouted, seeming to vent her frustration as she covered her blade in crimson flames and cut the metal chains. The dramatic difference in temperature triggered an explosion and broke them, causing Nick and Nargava to fall from a decent height.

"Owww... That hurts..." Nick muttered.

"Damn you...!" Nargava cursed.

They were both hurt from the fall. Nargava staggered to his feet while healing himself, and Zem ran straight for Nick.

"Heh, you really are an idiot. You bought that hook, line, and sinker," Nick said.

"That was a dirty trick!" Nargava shouted.

"I know, right? I'm proud of that one," Nick said with a wicked smile. "But you get the point, right? We can expose you whenever we want, even if we don't feel like it right now. You can't trust that we won't."

That was a bluff, too. The Survivors' top priority wasn't to defeat Nargava or stop him from achieving his goals. It was to figure out where he was keeping the children he abducted and save them. Regardless, they could not afford to let him get away.

"Are you okay, Nick?" Zem asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I think I've got him figured out," Nick responded. He took a deep breath, stood up, and took one step forward. "Could you give me another lesson?"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, foolish boy. Do you really think you can pull the same trick after already revealing your hand?" Nargava asked.

He approached Nick with calm steps. Karan looked like she was going to attack, but Nick stopped her with a look.

"Nick..." she said.

"Leave this to me."

Nick and Nargava's fists collided once again.

"Grk...!" Nick grunted.

Nargava's superior strength proved evident once again as he sent Nick flying across the room. The other Survivors watched dumbfounded as Nick soared over a few meters through the air. They were worried the earlier events of the battle would just be repeated.

"Nick!" Zem yelled, beginning to rush toward him. But just when Nick was about to crash into the ground, he twisted his body in midair and landed softly. "Huh?"

Nick ignored Zem's shock and brushed dust off his knees. He looked unhurt.

"Did you really figure out how to use this spell in such a short amount of time?" Nargava asked in surprise.

"Have I? Let's find out," Nick responded.

"Impudent little...!"

Nargava threw another forceful punch and sent Nick flying through the air like a toy.

"Hraah!" Nargava shouted, running after him in pursuit with steps so powerful it seemed like he would break through the floor. He reached Nick's landing spot in no time and tried to stomp on him as if he were trying to crush a grape. Nick dodged by rolling to the side and used Light Body to increase his agility. He got up and faced Nargava again, but the man landed another punch, once again sending him flying.

"...Okay," Nick muttered as he twisted his body in midair again like a cat, aiming for a soft landing. "Man, this is kinda nauseating. You can only use this so many times."

"Astounding. You've learned vector control in the course of this fight," Nargava said, visibly shocked.

"Vector control? What's that?" Nick asked.

"It's a defensive skill that involves adjusting your own weight to align yourself with the flow of your opponent's attack. If you lighten your body with magic and allow the attack to carry you, you can reduce the impact enough to take as little damage as if you were a falling leaf or feather."

"I'm not perfect at it yet, though."

"Even so, it is the most effective way to defend yourself against Heavy Body."

"I figured," Nick said, looking content and much more composed than Nargava. "But you're not just increasing your weight. You used Heavy Body to propel yourself forward and grant extra strength to your blow when you rushed toward me. And unlike me, you're making yourself heavier to lessen the damage you take... Oh, I just realized something. Do you use Heavy Body instead of Light Body when you swing around with your chains?"

Nargava exhaled quietly with a stern expression, then answered

with surprising calmness. "I travel irregular trajectories by quickly switching between Light Body and Heavy Body. I can also shift my center of gravity by chanting them both simultaneously. You cannot consider yourself a practitioner of Stepping until you master two kinds of vector control: one where you give yourself over to the flow of things, and another where you create it yourself."

"Stepping? I've never heard of that," Nick said.

"I wonder if your instructor decided you weren't ready to be taught that yet, or if they thought you would reach it on your own... Anyway, how did you realize my technique?"

Nick answered as casually as if he were discussing the weather. "Because I've studied a ton of empty-handed fighting styles, and I can more or less tell how heavy a person is when I fight them. I figured it out while trying to make sense of why your weight and your appearance don't match."

"I see."

"So you said you would give me a 'much-needed lesson.' Is there anything else you wanna share with me?"

"No, I've said too much. Consider what I've told you as a final gift on your way to the afterlife... Enticing you with more would only be cruel. Also, noticing my technique does not mean you can handle it."

"Heh, I know I'm too much of a beginner to beat you... But who says I have to fight you on equal footing?" Nick steadied his breathing. "You're a skilled mage, you're quicker than a wolf, and you're a heavyweight martial artist. But at the end of the day, you're only human. Taking you down will be a cinch."

Nick stretched his fingers and wrists to make sure he was loose, declaring his intent to get serious.

"I welcome you to try. We'll see if you can back up that confidence of yours," Nargava said.

"I've gotten a good sense of your strength. Now it's my turn to give you a lesson."

"Don't make me laugh. You are powerless before me."

Nargava threw a punch. Nick answered with a punch of his own, and they began to trade blows. Nick's proximity to Nargava rendered the other Survivors unable to help him. After a couple of minutes, Nargava feinted a punch and stepped back.

"*Obsidian Blades!*" he chanted, aiming the obsidian arrowheads for Nick's abdomen. Nick reacted quickly, taking a big step forward and knocking Nargava's hand aside with a backhand blow, diverting the arrowheads toward empty air.

"You can tell when an opponent's about to cast a spell by studying their eyes, hands, mouth, and mana. You clearly did train as a knight rather than as an adventurer. Your skill at deception is average," Nick

said.

“What?!” Nargava shouted, flustered. He attacked Nick with a left-handed palm heel strike, but Nick proved too cunning for him.

“Not so fast!”

Nargava used every move in his arsenal, including punches, kicks, knifehand strikes, spells, and more, but Nick blocked them all by subtly diverting the angles to avoid the full weight of the blows.

“Man, Magic Sense is useful. All I have to do is touch you and I can tell when you’re gonna cast a spell. I didn’t realize how convenient it is until using it in battle,” Nick said.

“Ngh...!”

Nargava activated Heavy Body and aimed a punch at Nick with all his strength.

“I couldn’t get a feel for you until now because you were constantly changing your weight. But now that I know your trick, this is easy,” Nick said.

Nargava broke off a piece of Nick’s leather armor with a sharp blow, but he was yet to scratch Nick’s body. His fully extended arm provided the opportunity Nick was waiting for.

“Got you,” Nick said.

“Grk!” Nargava grunted.

Nick coiled his arms around Nargava’s arm like a snake. The former high priest cast Heavy Body and tried his best to shake free, but Nick skillfully predicted the directions he would try to throw him in and tightened his grip.

“Hi-yah!”

While still holding Nargava’s arm, Nick lifted his lower body off the ground and aimed for the man’s neck with both his legs, once again trying to bring him down.

“I said the same move wouldn’t work twice!” Nargava yelled, trying to fall intentionally. He realized he had no chance of throwing Nick off unless he abandoned the notion that falling would put him at a disadvantage. He was beginning to notice the subtle differences in Nick’s style of combat from his own.

“Normally, that’d be the right move. You’ll want to break free even if you have to hurt yourself a little in the process. However...,” Nick said before doing something that shocked everyone in the facility. He wrapped his legs around Nargava’s shoulders instead of his neck, pulled himself up, and did a handstand on Nargava’s head with one finger. He then shifted his weight in the direction Nargava was trying to fall and kept him upright. Nick was preventing Nargava from falling with just one finger. Nimble didn’t even begin to describe his actions.

“Hup!” Nick bent his elbow and jumped using only his arm, then

caught Nargava by surprise by grabbing him from midair and wrapping his arms around his neck. He put all his strength into the chokehold, but Nargava refused to collapse, fighting hard to tear him off. The sounds of panting and skin chafing echoed through the facility. Exhaustion racked them both as drops of sweat fell to the floor.

“...It’s over,” Karan muttered when Nargava finally collapsed.

The Southern Saint vs. Stepping



Nick's and Nargava's heavy breathing echoed in the otherwise quiet facility. Nargava had reawakened after losing consciousness, but he didn't move a muscle; he seemed to have lost the will to fight. Nick also sat on the floor, feeling utterly exhausted. The intense fight had left both the victor and the loser equally spent.

"Why have you done all this? Explain yourself," Zem asked after approaching Nargava.

"I already told you," he responded.

"If what you said is true, you would have had no reason to treat patients without yellow demon fever or perform any other priestly services."

"I only helped those people because I was asked to. Refusing and starting a conflict would have caused trouble."

"You are contradicting yourself. You kidnapped children and started an epidemic. That is the work of an evil fiend."

"Then go ahead and finish me off or hand me to the guild."

"But while committing those crimes, you performed charity work for the people of the Garbage Heap despite that having nothing to do with your goals."

"I did that on a whim."

"Why were you so sloppy about keeping your actions hidden?"

"What do you mean?"

"You didn't change your kidnapping routine after we began to obstruct you. You remained in your clinic even after we visited and asked about the Steppingman. You submitted a thesis under your real name. You didn't try very hard to hide that girl's identity, either. Even with that magic item, you can't say the chances were slim to none of someone figuring out who she was after you left her in the morgue. I

could go on.”

Nargava didn't answer.

“Hey, we've got more questions to ask you. Where did you obtain the phantom king orb?” Nick asked.

Nargava didn't answer that, either. He just sat there in silence. The Survivors remained alert just in case he decided to attack them again, but Nargava did not care. He took a deep breath and sat up, crossing his legs. He had regained enough energy for that.

“Haah... Fine. I'll talk until he arrives,” he said.

“Huh? Who are you talking about?” Nick asked, just as the doors they had blocked with chairs and shelves burst open.

“Looks like you're having a rough time, priest,” came a muffled voice.

A person garbed in black walked through the doors. He looked so strange that Nick was unsure if he was actually a human. A black helmet and a white mask covered his face. His sleek armor was neither iron nor steel and was shaped like a vicious beetle. It clearly was not made by a local blacksmith. The pure-white mask looked like it was cut from porcelain or a jewel. Nothing about the person or his equipment seemed normal.

“Hey... It's a different color, but...,” Tiana muttered, her face stiff. She and Nick both shuddered at a certain familiar sight.

“That's...cognition armor, isn't it?” Nick asked.

“That's what I thought. And that sword is like Bond...,” Tiana responded.

“Yeah, it's an aura blade. Its color is unsettling, but that blade is definitely made of mana,” Nick said. Tiana nodded quietly, and someone audibly gulped. They were all overwhelmed by the knight's bizarre appearance. His very presence was intimidating.

“What do you want, White Mask?” Nargava asked the mysterious knight.

“Consider this an after-sale service. You appear in need of saving,” the knight said.

“I don't want your help.”

“Don't say that. I can't lose you yet, priest. Your work is not done. There are still many people in that disgusting landfill who need to die. If you don't continue to harvest them like ripe wheat, giving you that magic item will hardly have been worth it.”

“I have nearly accomplished my goal. I do not care if people die as a result of my work or not. I made no firm promises.”

The man Nargava called White Mask sighed. It sounded inhuman and devoid of emotion. He didn't even seem to breathe; instead, Nick thought he could hear air being expelled through some kind of vent.

“I'd like to go back over the contract with you right now... But

this is hardly the place for a relaxed chat,” he said.

The knight’s form flickered, and Karan and Tiana once again attacked simultaneously, Karan using Fire Breath and Tiana using Lightning Burst.

“...Huh?”

The spells passed through empty air—the knight had moved.

“Aaaah?!”

“Ngh...!”

Nick then heard Tiana and Karan scream behind him.

“Not a bad reaction. Especially for mortals such as yourselves.”

Nick turned around and saw Tiana being crushed underneath Karan. The knight had sent them flying with an attack that Karan had blocked by using her sword as a shield.

“You call yourselves the Survivors, correct? You are as tough as your name implies. I can see why it took him so long to obtain the dragon king gem,” the knight said.

“Wh-what?!” Nick gasped.

Nick couldn’t move. He knew he would be finished if he took one step toward the knight. He made the amalgam golem feel like a baby. He was probably stronger than Leon with the Sword of Evolution, or, heaven forbid, Argus. Karan and Tiana barely survived his attack, thanks to the Dragonbone Sword, but a direct hit would kill.

What should I do, then? Think. I have to get everyone out of here, Nick thought.

“You’re the leader, yes?” the knight asked, turning to Nick.

This is where I die, Nick thought the moment their eyes met. He focused, and time seemed to slow.

“Zem! Get Karan and Tiana out of here!” he yelled, casting Light Body with all the mana he could muster. *Become a feather. Become a running stream. Obtain flexibility great enough to survive the worst of storms.*

“...Interesting,” White Mask said.

The knight was before him in a flash. He swung his sword down, and Nick slipped under it. He was only able to dodge because he had predicted what the knight would do beforehand—one could only gamble against an opponent with significantly superior speed. He was lucky.

“Got you!” Nick yelled.

He grabbed the knight’s arm, dispelled Light Body, stepped firmly on the ground, and used all his strength—as well as White Mask’s—to throw him in a perfect parabola toward a giant washing tub.

“Hi-yah!”

The knight crashed into the tub with a dull sound. That was the strongest move currently in Nick’s arsenal. He suppressed his

excitement from pulling it off and called out to his party members.

“Run, you all!”

“Hmm. Fascinating. You have similar capabilities as Nargava.”

One negative consequence of Nick’s attack became immediately apparent—he made the knight get serious. He had bought about five to ten seconds. From the corner of his eye, he saw Zem reach Karan and Tiana. They might be able to escape to safety if they bolted now.

“As a reward, I’ll send you to the next life without pain.”

The knight was extremely fast. That didn’t just apply to how quickly he could swing his sword or run, but to his reaction time as well, which was what made him most formidable. Nick was not capable of maintaining the level of concentration needed to fight this man. That meant there was only one option.

“Oh? You’re giving up?” the knight said.

He had no choice but to risk his life again. He wasn’t going to dodge like last time—he was going to counter while letting the knight hit him. Nick was unlikely to survive. He lowered his arms, relaxed his muscles, and kept his eyes peeled for the moment the knight swung his sword for his neck. His one regret was that he wouldn’t live to see whether his attack succeeded or not.

“Karan, what was it that you wanted to do?” Nick muttered. *It’s fine. I don’t need to know*, he thought, feeling strangely calm.

“That’s the spirit,” the knight said. His black blade began to glow.

Guess this is it, Nick thought.

“Yaaaah!”

Just then, a woman kicked the knight in the back of the head with a birdlike cry.

“Gwah!” the knight grunted.

“Wh-what the...? Hey, it’s—!” Nick shouted.

“Never mind my identity. Pull yourself together!”

A hooded woman with loose sleeves stood before the black knight, calmly assuming a fighting stance. Nick couldn’t contain his joy at being saved.

“What took you so long, Olivia?!” he yelled.

“Hey, can you—?” Olivia began before Nick interrupted.

“Actually, it doesn’t matter! You saved me! I owe you one!”

“Listen—”

“Hey, Zem! Olivia’s here!”

“I told you not to worry about my identity! Why do you think I’m wearing this hood?!”

“Oh, uh, my bad. I didn’t realize that was a disguise...”

The knight stood up as they spoke. “Who are you?”

“I guess this is our first meeting. Your reputation precedes you, White Mask,” Olivia responded.

“White Mask? Oh yeah, I’ve heard that somewhere before...,” Nick said, trying to remember where. Olivia offered an explanation.

“White Mask is rumored to be a vigilante thief who steals from wealthy nobles and wicked merchants, but the truth is much more sinister. He’s actually an agent of the grand demon worshippers, who steals magic items from anyone by any means necessary and performs shady rituals. He occasionally aids and gives weapons to criminals and denizens of the darkness who suit his needs, which has led villains to call him the ‘Dark Saint’ or the ‘Southern Saint.’”

“Huh? I don’t know what you’re talking about...,” Nick responded, but comprehension dawned on Nargava’s face.

“That is why you helped me and encouraged me to kill all those people. You’re also the one who tried to steal corpses from me... Were you planning to use them as sacrifices?” he asked.

“That is not for you to know. Or have you finally developed a conscience after all the deaths you’ve caused? Don’t make me laugh,” White Mask sneered, swinging his sword.

“Geez, you’re strong...!” Olivia gasped after blocking his sword with her arms. The grating sound of metal on metal echoed throughout the building; she must have had some kind of defensive equipment under her sleeves.

“You’re fast, whoever you are. But your physical strength is inadequate,” the knight uttered.

“Right?! I’m just a delicate girl, after all!” Olivia said before dashing toward White Mask so fast she seemed to blur.

“What?!”

Olivia dealt blow after blow with speed even greater than White Mask’s. She kicked his knees when he stepped toward her, elbowed his chin when he lowered his head, and delivered three punches to his open side when he tried to swing his sword at her. White Mask stepped back reflexively, and she pursued with a stance so low she was nearly crawling. He responded with another sweep of his sword, which Olivia dodged smoothly, as if she were a petal in the wind. She then avoided a large swing and struck him with five palm strikes to the stomach.

“Damn you!” the knight yelled. Olivia had cracked his black cognition armor. A sinister red light poked through, which disappeared as the armor slowly repaired itself.

“Yeah, it’s gonna take more than that to break holy armor from the ancient civilization,” Olivia said.

Nick was captivated by the bizarre scene. It looked like Olivia was using Stepping like Nick and Nargava, but she wasn’t using any other special skills. She had gone beyond the fundamentals of the art and achieved true mastery. The way she flowed as she fought, almost as if

she were dancing, was a level all martial artists sought to reach.

"I-incredible...!" Nick said.

"Quit gawking and help me out! His armor is too hard for me to break through!" Olivia shouted.

"I don't know what to do..."

"You think you have time to talk, do you? You'll pay for that arrogance!" White Mask yelled. He released a strange, reddish-brown aura from his body. It took on the shape of a sphere and cracked the floor as it expanded. "*Labyrinth Creation: Great Red Spot.*"

"O-oh no!" Olivia gasped, coughing.

The sphere quickly expanded and trapped Olivia within. Her glasses broke, and blood dripped from her ears.

"Within this range, gravity, atmospheric pressure, and temperature greatly increase. It was originally an experimental barrier spell meant for creating a training environment, but if you keep the range small like so, the pressure within becomes great enough to kill a person," White Mask explained.

"Olivia!" Nick shouted.

"Th-this is really painful... Sorry, I should've known I didn't have time to talk..."

"Stop talking, you idiot! Hey, Nargava! Use your chains to pull her out!" Nick commanded.

"No, don't worry about me," Olivia said, smiling confidently as blood streamed down her face. "I've bought enough time. He should be here any second now."

A sword zoomed through the entrance right after she finished speaking and stopped before Nick's eyes. It was floating in the air.

"Sorry I'm late!" A voice reverberated from the sword.

"About time you showed up!" Nick yelled.

"It wasn't my fault! I cannot return to my sword form until my copies rejoin!"

"I know that! Anyway, I'm glad you're here!"

It was Bond—or rather, the Sword of Bonds. Nick grabbed the handle without hesitation.

"I have a lot of things I wanna say and ask, but...Zem! I know this is sudden notice, but let's do this!" Nick yelled.

"Very well!" Zem responded. He stood up from treating Karan's and Tiana's injuries and raced toward Nick.

"Union!" they both yelled.

Nick/Zem vs. the Southern Saint



Tiana awoke after momentarily losing consciousness.

“Urgh...,” she moaned.

“Are you okay, Tiana?” Karan asked, concerned.

Tiana endured the pain and got up to scan their surroundings.

“What’s going on?”

“Olivia bought us time. She’s really strong.”

“I still don’t have any idea on what’s happening.”

“I’m a little lost, too, but... Look over there.”

Tiana looked where Karan was pointing and saw brilliant light erupting out of the Sword of Bonds. The light coalesced and took the shape of a handsome man with beautiful black hair and a toned body. They weren’t holding the sword; instead, it floated around them, releasing four pure blades of light from the handle.

The strange white light enveloping their arms and legs seemed to take the place of a weapon. Their cognition armor was shaped differently from normal armor—it covered only the important parts of their body and seemed to prioritize the mobility of their limbs. It made the man look like a fierce fighter.

“Wow, where’d this hottie come from?” Tiana joked, eliciting a laugh from Karan. The appearance of the man was no laughing matter to White Mask.

“Union?! That’s ridiculous! That’s a lost ancient spell!” he yelled, astonished. He observed his opponent carefully.

The man—Nick/Zem—stepped forward.

“Time for round three,” they said with a mystical, sonorous voice. They then snapped their fingers. “*Full Heal.*”

The floating Sword of Bonds shone brightly, illuminating the facility. The light enveloped Tiana and Karan, healing their injuries

completely. Tiana's mood improved instantly when the dull pain in her back and head vanished. Compared to the spell that Zem had chanted earlier, this one was on another level.

"Amazing... Healing someone without touching them is no easy feat. Are your spells being channeled through the sword?" Tiana asked.

"It seems that way," Nick/Zem answered.

The healing spell didn't only reach members of the Survivors.

"Ngh... I didn't ask for that...," Nargava grunted. He had been included as well.

"Oh, shut up," Tiana snapped. She and Karan dragged Nargava and hid under a washing tub to stay out of the way, offering slightly embarrassed cheers.

"Sorry for the delay. Let's get back to it," Nick/Zem said.

"Is that the holy sword with the power of Union? The prototype that went unused in the last war?" White Mask asked.

"That is not something you need to know."

"Oh dear. Is this because of the crimes I've committed? Then I'll just force you to answer me."

White Mask concentrated mana into his left hand and expelled an even more sinister aura, which expanded into another barrier. Nick/Zem did the unexpected by stepping directly into it.

"H-hey! Don't just step into his barriers!" Tiana yelled, but they ignored her warning and remained calm. Once their body was completely inside, they performed an incantation.

"Regeneration."

"What?!" White Mask exclaimed.

The Sword of Bonds glowed yet again, its white light expanding to completely cover the malicious red barrier.

"I don't know the principle behind it, but we can neutralize any damage-dealing barrier with one of our own."

Regeneration was a barrier spell that could normally only be cast by a team of high priests after scrupulous training. It instantly healed the injuries of any within its range. The spell was nearly forbidden as it prevented death and injury from any type of attack.

"Phew... It's not quite as bad now. Do you mind if I go fix my makeup?" Olivia asked. She put her broken glasses in her chest pocket and wiped the blood from her face, but it was clear she was exhausted. She didn't receive the last healing spell because of the barrier, and Regeneration's effect seemed limited.

Feeling that they were finally on even ground with White Mask because of the effects of their cognition armor and the barrier, Nick/Zem watched him vigilantly.

"Stay put and rest, Olivia. We've healed your injuries, but there's

nothing we can do about the increased gravity other than to defeat this asshole,” Nick/Zem said, taking a large step toward White Mask, breaking the floor under their feet. They punched the knight in the stomach with a glowing white fist.

“Gaaaah!”

White Mask staggered violently, falling to his knees with dented armor and pained breathing.

““We finally managed to cause some damage... We have a number of questions. It is about time you talked,”” Nick/Zem said, stretching their fingers.

“Don’t get cocky!” White Mask yelled furiously. His dented armor returned to normal.

““...Drats. We put effort into that attack, too.””

“It takes more than that to destroy holy armor!”

White Mask retaliated by swinging his sword as hard as he could.

““Geez, that was strong...!””

Nick/Zem crossed their arms and blocked the attack with their gauntlets. They tried to hold their ground, but the sharp and heavy attack pushed them back, their feet tearing up the hard floor.

“I believe his sword’s original blade may be folded into a different dimension. It might have been a greatsword larger than the Dragonbone Sword... Or perhaps a staff or a hammer,” the Sword of Bonds said.

““Bond, say it in a way we can understand,”” Nick/Zem responded.

“Hmm... It is heavier than it looks. Imagine they are using a massive hammer instead of a sword.”

““Got it!””

White Mask and Nick/Zem’s fight continued for some time. Every collision resounded with a *clang* or a *thud*, making the laundromat sound like a construction site. They both fought with surprising precision amid all that deafening noise. White Mask was quiet and efficient in his movements, projecting an air of stoicism. Nick/Zem displayed a mysterious skill as they blocked his attacks and responded with punches.

“The more injured you become in my barrier, the harder a time Regeneration will have of keeping up. It’s simple math,” White Mask declared.

Just as he claimed, Nick/Zem’s wounds were starting to heal slower. White Mask’s injuries, on the other hand, were still healing automatically, possibly because of the effects of the armor.

“Let’s see you block this!” White Mask shouted, delivering a sharp blow with his sword so powerful that Nick/Zem felt the impact in their core when they caught it with their armor. If not for Regeneration, they likely would have been sent soaring to their death. White Mask wasn’t uninjured, but his strength and endurance were far superior.

“Man, I’m impressed. You could’ve been known as a peerless fighter if you didn’t hide from public view,” Nick/Zem said.

“I have no interest in fleeting matters such as fame,” White Mask responded.

“Really? You’re surprisingly stoic.”

“That’s enough of your impudence.”

“Yeah, it’s time to get serious.”

“Huh?”

White Mask’s tone expressed disbelief as Nick/Zem floated in the air. They had simply jumped without coming down.

“Do you think you can catch me off guard with—? What?!”

Instead of continuing to rise, Nick/Zem turned at a sharp, unnatural angle in the air with tremendous speed and struck his knee from the side.

“Gah!”

“Steppemen can ultimately only perform movements that are physically possible. They can jump high enough to clear a building, but they can’t perform stunts like this.”

“Wh-what the hell did you do?!”

Nick/Zem only smiled in response. “Let’s pick up the speed. Try your best to dodge.”

They toyed with White Mask by zipping around him quickly like light reflecting off mirrors. Their chaotic movement differed greatly from the extreme finesse of Olivia’s fighting style.

“D-damn you...!”

White Mask swung his sword and missed, leaving his chest defenseless. Nick/Zem fainted like they were going to take advantage with a punch, then retreated diagonally upward to quickly circle around him and attack from the back. They continued to overwhelm him with unpredictable moves, leaving White Mask wounded all over. The tables had been turned.

“If that’s all you’ve got, how about we go ahead and end this?”

“Don’t think this is over, you brat! *Magic Search!*” White Mask chanted, extending a hand toward seemingly nothing. “There it is... *Guided Fireball!*” He then shot ten fireballs from his hand. They floated in the air for a moment before speeding off in all directions.

“Oh, crap,” Nick/Zem cursed.

The fireballs didn’t go far before they collided with nothing and exploded.

“I knew it... You formed a kind of cognition armor around us. You used it as a platform to make it look like you were floating,” White Mask said.

“Damn... Good job figuring that out. I also made it so whenever we step on it, we gain momentum from the recoil. It’s a simple trick,”

Nick/Zem said.

“That sword is controlling it!” White Mask yelled. He turned his gaze to the floating Sword of Bonds and leaped at it with his sword held aloft.

““Oh no, we’re in trouble now! ...Psych,”” Nick/Zem said with a sneer.

“Hah, I knew you would attack me!”

The Sword of Bonds laughed and began to spin so quickly it looked like a shining wheel, the blades viciously cutting air.

“Hraah!”

White Mask yelled and struck the spinning sword fearlessly. The collision resulted in a blinding burst of light and heat. The speed of both blades was so great that the impact practically resulted in an explosion.

““Hey, don’t forget about us.””

Nick/Zem wasted no time taking advantage of White Mask’s loss of balance and hammered him with punches, kicks, and elbows. As soon as White Mask turned his attention to dodging their attacks, the Sword of Bonds struck him with a parabolic swing. White Mask was strong, but he couldn’t defend himself from all angles at once. Nick/Zem then brought their heel down upon White Mask’s head, spiking him so hard, the floor caved in when he fell. He lay there with his limbs outstretched.

““...Did we do it?””

A momentary silence fell over the abandoned facility. Nick/Zem hoped they had won, but they knew it was unlikely to be that easy. Their hope was crushed when White Mask laughed loudly.

“Heh-heh-heh... I must commend you. I haven’t been put in a pinch like this in a very long time!” he said, getting up slowly. Red light poked through a gap in his black armor; it felt like his immense power was swelling like a balloon.

““Bond, what’s happening?”” Nick/Zem asked.

“If that really is holy armor, then it has likely activated emergency evacuation mode. He will be significantly faster than before. That applies not just to his physical speed, but to his cranial nerves as well. Be ready for his skills to have enhanced,” the Sword of Bonds answered.

““Hey, don’t sound so nonchalant about it!””

“Prepare yourself... No more holding back from me!”

They reengaged, entering a total deadlock. Flashes of light accompanied by thunderous booms illuminated the facility, and cracks formed in the walls and floor. It looked like the place could collapse at any moment. The only reason it hadn’t was because they limited the size of their barriers and consciously tried to avoid expanding the battlefield—their attacks would have caused untold destruction otherwise.

They continued to walk that deadly tightrope until the deadlock finally neared a conclusion.

“Heh-heh... You should be proud you succeeded in pushing me this far!” White Mask yelled.

Nick/Zem were starting to be overwhelmed. The extreme pressure of White Mask’s barrier was causing their cognition armor to pop off their body, and the Sword of Bond’s light was beginning to dim. They were also reaching the end of their mana supply.

““No ordinary person could withstand our attacks for this long. You’re a great fighter, too,”” Nick/Zem responded.

“Hah, I have no need for compliments from children such as yourselves. But I will do you the favor of remembering you.”

““Ditto to that... Nice knowing you, White Mask. You lost ‘cause you were too focused on outlasting us.””

“Hah, what are you—?” White Mask was interrupted when his breastplate swelled unnaturally. “Gah... Y-you?!”

“Hey, that went pretty well for an impromptu team up.”

Olivia had hit White Mask in the back with a palm strike so hard that the impact traveled through his body to his chest on the other side, resulting in an explosion. She pretended to retreat during the battle and instead recovered her energy, replenished her mana, and watched for a chance to deliver the final blow.

““We knew it would be cooler to defeat you on our own, but you had an advanced magic item, trapped your opponent in a barrier, and fought hard to make this situation as favorable for yourself as you could. You have no right to call what we did dirty,”” Nick/Zem said with the malicious smile that Zem displayed on occasion.

“Nonsense!” White Mask yelled.

“Let’s go, Nick! Or should I call you Zem?” Olivia asked.

““Either one is fine.””

Olivia began to strike White Mask with lethal blows to his vital points. Nick/Zem punched the broken breastplate hard, to make doubly sure he would stay down.



“Nick! Zem!”

White Mask’s reddish-brown barrier disappeared, and Tiana and Karan rushed toward them. Nick/Zem dispelled Union as they did so, and each of them fell to the floor. They had both exhausted their mana and stamina and were completely out of breath.

“I’m pooped... My life flashed before my eyes,” Nick said.

“Mine as well. I have never felt so close to dying,” Zem agreed.

“That was way too reckless,” Karan said, grabbing Nick’s hand to help him up.

“Sorry... Stay on your toes, everyone. This isn’t over yet,” Nick said, watching White Mask from the corner of his eye. He was deathly motionless, and his armor showed no signs of regenerating. That function may have been broken. “What the hell is he anyway?”

“Let’s take his weapon and restrain him. We should also take off his mask and gag him so he cannot cast—” Zem was interrupted when someone yanked him backward. “Huh?”

It was Nargava. Zem glared at him, thinking he still intended to fight, and something zoomed toward Nargava with a high-pitched squeal.

“Grk...,” he grunted.

“Nargava?!” Zem yelled.

The object, whatever it was, pierced a small hole through his body. Blood gushed forth from the wound. They all looked in the direction the object came from and saw a strange metal tube protruding from White Mask’s sleeve. The tube was matte black tempered metal. It didn’t look like a magic item—it didn’t have the jewel that was inserted into mages’ staves.

“I never thought I’d have to rely on such a cheap trick... But I suppose that’s our contract,” White Mask said, sounding dejected. He didn’t sound like someone who had just accomplished a mission.

“He’s still alive! Take cover, everyone! Zem... Ah, crap! You’re out of mana!” Nick said after mustering what energy he had left, watching for any more strange attacks.

“Got it!” Karan responded.

“Over here! *Ice Shield!*” Tiana chanted.

Karan jumped forward and held her Dragonbone Sword as a shield, and Tiana used that as cover to cast a wide-range defensive spell. Zem approached them to cast a healing spell but failed because of his lack of mana. They all felt a wave of frustration—they knew they were in trouble.

But White Mask didn’t attack again.

“And with that, I bid you farewell,” he said. He turned around and dashed off as if nothing had happened.

“H-hey, come back here!” Nick yelled. White Mask responded by pointing the strange tube at him.

“Look out! That’ll easily pierce through any armor!” Olivia shouted, grabbing Nick and forcing him to the ground. Multiple high-pitched squeals followed as White Mask shot more of the objects out of his tube, which, despite their small size, mercilessly tore through the washing tubs and pillars in the building. Nick could tell that getting hit by one of them would mean death.

“What are those?” he asked.

“I didn’t expect him to have a forbidden weapon that can no longer be manufactured. Talk about overkill...,” Olivia replied, sounding irritated.

“Forbidden weapon? What do you mean by that?”

“Anyway, it’s safe to assume he’s secured an escape route. We’re exhausted, too, so let’s call this a draw. Actually, we broke his valuable armor and made him waste many of his limited bullets. We can consider that a victory.”

“Can you stop saying things that don’t make any sense? How big of an ancient civilization fanatic *are* you? Don’t tell me you were born back then.”

“Ack.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding... Anyway, Nargava’s more important right now.”

Nick looked at the former high priest, who had collapsed and was losing a large amount of blood from his wound. It was clear that he was near death.

“Zem!” Nick shouted.

“I know! Dammit... Please say it’s not too late!” Zem implored.

“Forget about me... You...,” Nargava wheezed.

“Be quiet!” Zem shouted.

“You need...to run...” Nargava weakly pointed toward a fragment of White Mask’s armor. It looked slightly different from when it was first broken off.

“Huh? That piece of armor is glowing...,” Tiana muttered.

“Oh no! The information concealment process has started!” Olivia exclaimed.

“It’s going to explode! Run!” Bond yelled.

“Run where?!” Nick shouted, panicking.

“Anywhere! Get behind that!” Tiana yelled, pointing toward a toppled washing tub. They all ran toward it and crowded inside. Nick picked up Nargava and followed.

“Don’t waste...your effort... I’m already dying...,” Nargava muttered.

“Shut up! I don’t know if we’ll get our reward if you croak here!

You can die after repenting for what you've done in prison!" Nick yelled as he leaped into the toppled tub.

Just as he made it inside, the armor exploded.

Nick awoke to rays of light from the purple-tinged sun peeking through the window and to the sound of birds singing. It would have been a refreshing morning if not for his extreme exhaustion and pain.

"Ngh... Where am I?"

"Stay in bed. You need to rest," Olivia answered.

Nick almost asked why she was in his room, but realized they were somewhere else as there was no Agate merchandise in sight.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"The Manhunt infirmary. Adventurers who aren't injured badly enough to need the hospital are carried here."

"We survived the explosion...?"

"Yep. Like I said, you need rest. Do you feel any pain?"

Olivia watched Nick's face and began to ask him questions about how he felt. He wouldn't have thought she'd have good bedside manners, given her usual casual attitude, but she was surprisingly good at acting like a doctor.

"Okay, looks like you only have external injuries. You're a tough guy!" she said.

"I'm glad for that, at least," Nick responded.

He sat up in the small bed. The white light of the magic lamp and the still bluish sun mingled to give the room a cool glow. He looked around and found Zem and Bond sleeping. Nick was dumbfounded by the calm of the room, as just earlier, they were in immense danger at the abandoned facility.

"Where are Tiana and Karan?" Nick asked.

"The girls were more badly hurt, so they're being treated at a proper facility. Their lives aren't in danger."

"Thanks." Nick sighed with relief upon learning his party members were safe. "So who are you?"

"Oh, that question again..."

"Did you really think I wouldn't ask?" Nick said, exasperated. "What could you possibly have to hide at this point? Eh, I won't force it if you don't want to answer."

"Huh? Are you sure?"

"I already have an idea of what you are. You must be from the ancient civilization."

"You're pretty close, actually."

"Either that or you're such a hard-core occult fanatic that you've convinced yourself that you were born back then."

"That's just pathetic..." Olivia laughed weakly. She steeled herself

and sat up straight, as if resigning herself to something. “Bond can use Union. I’m guessing that makes him the Sword of Bonds?”

“You know about that?”

“Yeah. I was forged after him.”

“I knew it... You’re one of those wonky weapons.”

“Hey! What do you mean, ‘wonky’?”

“Give me your real name if you don’t want me to call you that.”

“I’m the Sword of Might,” Olivia muttered.

“The Sword of Might?” Nick repeated.

“Yes. I am the Spirit-Class Anti-Demon Combat Training Program, the Sword of Might. That’s my product name and my project name.”

Those last words sounded familiar. Bond had said “project name” when he’d introduced himself, too.

“So you’re like Bond. Do you have an owner?”

“No. I can’t use any special spells like Union. My role is different from the other holy swords.”

“Your role?”

Olivia nodded.

“The other holy swords were essentially made as weapons to be used in the decisive battle against the grand demons. I, on the other hand, am a tool made to train people before they face such threats.”

“Wouldn’t have predicted that...,” Nick said, surprised. He scrunched his face when he realized something. “Oh yeah, Nargava had a term for spells like Light Body...”

“The term is *Stepping*. It’s a form of combat devised to allow those without a lot of mana or the physique to fight strong opponents. I’ve taught it to many apprentices,” Olivia responded.

“Really...?”

That information gave Nick a newfound respect for Olivia—she was a true master of the martial arts.

“I started traveling the world after the war against the grand demons ended and peace was achieved. I couldn’t tell you how many years I spent picking up and training passing children and granting apprenticeships after beating people in combat. I’ve been taking fewer apprentices lately in favor of fighting villains like White Mask, journeying as an adventurer and eating delicious food, and working as a magazine reporter after developing a fascination for the occult.”

“I think there’s such a thing as being too free-spirited.”

Nick slightly regretted the respect he’d just felt for her.

“Nargava might be an apprentice of an apprentice, or an apprentice of one even further back in time... You get the idea. It pained me to see his fate,” Olivia said sadly.

“I see...,” Nick responded.

“That probably makes you one of mine, too.”

"I dunno how to feel about that..."

"You feel honored, is what! Don't act like the idea disgusts you!"

"Forget about that. I have more important things I wanna ask you. The fight's over, but there's still more left to do... Ah."

Nick fell silent, his expression turning serious.

"Hmm? What's wrong, Nick?" Olivia asked.

A long list of things he needed to do flooded into his mind at once, sending a sense of urgency racing through his body like an electric current.

"The Steppingman... Oh, right! What happened to Nargava?!" Nick yelled.

"Please calm down, Nick!"

"Nargava was the Steppingman! He was the one abducting children! We can't let White Mask kill him to keep him quiet!"

"He's already succeeded at that, unfortunately. Nargava lost too much blood and died before we reached the guild."

Olivia quietly shook her head.

"Crap!"

Nick punched his bed in frustration.

"What's wrong? We fought off White Mask. He escaped, but only after we injured him. He'll have to lie low for a while as he recovers. Is there anything else you're worried about?"

Nick didn't know how to answer. He was anxious about so many things that he had no idea where to start.

"I'm thinking," he said.

"I still say you should rest first..."

"There's no time for that! Can't you think of something?!"

"What do you...? Oh—" Olivia stopped, seeming to remember something. "I picked these up."

"These look like notes...", Nick said, taking two pieces of paper from her. He studied them closely. There were a number of strange lines drawn on the first one. If they were symbols, he had no idea what they meant. The other piece of paper had arrows drawn on it.

"I think it looks like a map? I'm not sure, though. I don't know what the arrows on the second one mean," Olivia said.

"Hmm... Oh, I know what the arrows are. It's a code for a magic lock," Nick said.

"Huh? Those exist?"

"It's a magic item that's been gaining popularity recently. People use them to lock safes and warehouse doors. I don't know what this maplike one is, either... Hmm..."

A wave of drowsiness came over him, but he fought to keep his eyes open and racked his brain. The map looked familiar. He knew it was important.

"I've seen this before... But where?" Nick wondered.

"Are you feeling okay?" Olivia asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I just need to think... Come on, think..."

Nick grimaced and raked his fingers through his hair. Olivia sighed.

"You need to sleep."

"I know! But I need to figure this out! Why did Nargava leave this there?!"

"Maybe he wanted to tell us something..."

"Like what?"

"Maybe something he's been hiding until now."

Nick thought about that. What was the Steppingman hiding? He was concealing his identity, but that was just to help him achieve his goal. His goal was to kidnap people. Children, specifically.

"I know what it is," Nick said.

"Did you figure out how to read it?" Olivia asked.

"This is definitely a map."

"A map for what? It doesn't look like Labyrinth City."

"It may not look that way, but it is. This is a map made for a Steppingman. It looks different because these aren't roads, they're paths for people who can walk atop roofs and fences!"

Nick finally remembered why it was familiar. It looked like the Steppingman routes Ada had drawn. The map was roughly drawn because Nargava must have used the last of his strength to make it, but Nick knew exactly where it was pointing and what its purpose was. His vague sense of danger was taking shape.

"Nargava being silenced means that the children he abducted are in danger, too. He might have drawn this so we could find and save them," Nick said.

"I see... It's a race against time," Olivia responded, her expression turning grim. The gravity of the situation had dawned on her.

"Hey, Zem! Wake up! We're not done yet! You too, Bond!" Nick shouted.

"S-slow down, Nick. They're hardly in a fit state—"

"Shut up! You're not doing anything! Help us out!" Nick yelled, overpowering the usually aloof Olivia. She finally seemed to realize the gravity of the situation.

"Ngh... Nick...", Zem muttered.

"You're awake, Zem!"

"Yes, I heard your conversation... I just couldn't get up."

Zem looked completely exhausted. His wounds had closed, but Union and all the spells he cast must have drained his mana. The only way to recover from that was rest.

"Haah... Fine. I'll carry you both," Olivia said.

"That'd be great... Actually, no, I can walk," Nick protested.

"No way you can't. Not like that. Let's go!" Olivia responded, picking up Nick and Zem.

"H-hey! What the hell are you doing?!" Nick shouted.

"We're going to save those kids! Tell me where to go!"

"I know that, but I don't wanna be seen like this!"

"Do you want to get there quickly or not?!"

Olivia ignored Nick's complaints. He gave up and read Nargava's note.

"W-wait... Uh, this is probably the factory, which makes this the church wall... There's a residential area to the northwest of the factory. Carry me and Zem there," he requested.

"Got it. Let's go!" Olivia responded. She took off running with shocking speed.

"H-hey, can you please slow down?!" Zem objected, but Olivia ignored that, too.

"Don't talk! You'll bite your tongue!" she said.

There was still morning mist as Olivia carried Nick and Zem through Labyrinth City. Doing his best to ignore the suspicious stares of the merchants preparing their stalls for the morning market and the newspaper deliverymen, Nick read the note.

"Take a right next! Go down the street opposite from that government building—"

"I'm taking a shortcut!"

"H-hey!"

Olivia stepped firmly on the ground and chanted a spell, then jumped over a building with one tremendous leap. Nick was astonished; she was even more nimble than Nargava.

"This is what a real Steppingman is capable of...," Nick said.

"I don't remember calling myself that!" Olivia shouted.

Olivia leaped from rooftop to rooftop with absurd speed, seeming to think of her route as she went. She relied purely on her agility and jumping ability without the use of chains or ropes. The scenery flew by so quickly, it made Nick nauseated. He had little choice but to leave the navigation to Olivia.

"Is this it?" she asked when they arrived at their destination.

"Yep," Nick answered.

Olivia put them both down. Zem immediately put his back to the wall and slid down to the ground, still obviously groggy. Nick resisted doing the same and pounded on the door.

"Hey, are you all okay?! Is anyone in there?!" he yelled.

No one answered.

"Is the door locked? What should we do?" Olivia asked.

“Open it, obvio... Huh?”

They had arrived at a totally normal three-story wooden residence. The wooden door had a metal doorknob with a perfectly ordinary keyhole, rather than the magic lock Nick was expecting.

“Is this note not a code? Or do we have the wrong place?” Nick wondered aloud.

“No, this building is definitely suspicious,” Olivia said. She pressed her palm to the door as if to check something. She then knocked on the door and tapped the wall.

“Huh, can you tell something by doing that?”

“You can figure out how many people there are in a building and their general physiques from the vibration of their voices and how the building creaks when they walk.”

“So? How many people are in there?”

“I have no idea.”

“Hey.”

“The building is so quiet, it’s unnatural. I couldn’t even perceive the reverberations from hitting the wall... It’s not that there’s no one in the building. There’s an *illusion* making it seem that way.”

“So Nargava did something to hide the children?”

“He probably placed an illusion to conceal the children living within so that the neighbors wouldn’t notice them. That means any attempt to call for help would go unnoticed.”

“It’s probably a phantom king orb fragment, then. Crap, what a pain in the ass,” Nick cursed.

Zem finally staggered to his feet.

“Does that mean the children could scream at the top of their lungs without being heard?” he asked.

“Most likely. This note Nargava wrote is probably the combination to unlock the door from the inside. There’s nothing we can do out here,” Nick responded.

“Should we break down the door?” Zem asked.

“Oh yeah, why didn’t I think of that? There’s no reason to hold back,” Nick said, his expression brightening.

“Right! Duh! I’ll give it a taste of my secret technique!” Olivia proclaimed cheerfully. She prepared to strike the door, but Nick suddenly stopped her.

“Actually, no. We’re not doing that.”

“Hey, don’t pull on me like that! These combat clothes are expensive!” Olivia complained.

“He might’ve set a trap in addition to the illusion. Destroying the door might cause the building to explode or be set on fire. Breaking in by force should be our last resort.”

“Then what should we do?” Olivia asked.

"That's what we need to figure out!" Nick said, rubbing his head.

"Can you please explain that note to me?" Zem inquired.

"Huh? Oh, sure..."

"We know nothing of the situation inside. They might be surprisingly comfortable, or they could have already been moved somewhere else. There is also a chance they are hoping for someone to save them as soon as possible. If that is the case, what we need to do is clear."

Nick explained the note to Zem in detail. Once Zem got the gist of it, he stood in front of the door.

"We cannot hear you from here! But you should be able to hear us!" Zem said with a carrying voice. "I am guessing the door is blocked by chains. You can only unlock it from the inside. We cannot risk destroying the door because of the chance of a trap! You need to unlock it yourselves!"

Neighbors began to crowd around them to see what was going on, but Zem didn't pay them any mind. Ten minutes passed. All they could do was hope the children inside were following their instructions.

"There should be a single bead-sized gem inserted into the chains. Press it gently with a finger. After holding it for ten seconds, a green arrow should appear," Zem instructed.

"Hey, what's with the racket? It's the break of dawn," one of the people complained.

"Go back to your houses. You're getting in the way," Nick responded threateningly. Olivia hurriedly pushed people away so they wouldn't bother Zem.

"Hey, what gives?!" a man shouted.

"We'll be done soon! Please don't make too much noise!" Olivia requested.

"You're the ones making noise," another person accused.

Zem ignored the commotion and repeated the same instructions three times. He spoke slowly, loudly, and clearly. He then waited another ten minutes.

"Once the green arrow appears, trace the stone to change the arrow's direction in the order I say. First..."

Zem read them the combination and repeated it three times. Nearly an hour had passed since he'd begun, but nothing happened. By the time he started the explanation over from the beginning, the neighbors had lost interest and left. Nick and Olivia kept watching.

The former priest raised his voice. "Nargava is not coming back. He is dead."

Zem reflected on the past. When he was imprisoned, he wanted nothing more than to get out. He would have done anything to regain

his freedom. But it was when he was finally released that his pride was truly broken. He had lived his sentence in constant fear that he would be abandoned to starve to death or that he would go insane and spend the rest of his life locked away, but when he was finally taken out of the cell, his first thought was that he didn't want to leave.

The cell was cramped and isolating, but there was no threat other than the guards. But even they had lines they couldn't cross, and they rarely entered the cell. They never did anything Zem didn't expect. His fear grew the longer he was cut off from news of the outside world. His delusions became reality in his mind. When he was banished and pelted with jeers and stones on the way out of the village, Zem even wished he had died in the cell.

"Do your best to remember. This is not your home. It is not a fortress to protect you from outside threats. It is a prison to shut you away and isolate you from the world," he said. If his own experience was any indicator, he was positive the children would not feel immediately happy to hear they were being set free. He knew they would be afraid and slow to trust after all that time being locked away in that small world. "You are free to remain inside until you are convinced it is safe to leave. But please make a decision when you are ready. I will repeat myself."

Once again, Zem gave the instructions for unlocking the door. The last of the onlookers left when the day passed noon and the sun began its descent to the west. Not long after that, they heard a click and saw the doorknob turn.

"A-are you really saving us?"

A girl opened the door. There were five more children, boys and girls, behind her. Their clothes were dirty, their hair unkempt, and their eyes were lifeless. Some of them had bruises, likely from fighting among themselves.

"You have no need to stay here. You can return to your homes," Zem said kindly.

The children all began to cry.

A Much-Deserved Rest



The Survivors remained extremely busy after resolving the Steppingman case. They could have brought suspicion upon themselves if they botched any of the explanations of the unbelievable things that had happened. Worst case, there was a chance they could have been charged for the murder of Nargava, who was known as a charitable doctor. Nargava's real murderer, White Mask, had fled, and the piece of armor they could have used as evidence had exploded without a trace. Olivia was the only person who could testify to back up their story, but her occupation as an occult reporter might only make people less inclined to believe them.

Redd explained all of this passionately when the Survivors returned to Anemone Alehouse, and they quickly got to work looking for evidence. They explained the situation to the Manhunt guild employees, thoroughly investigated the clinic in the Garbage Heap and the house where the children were imprisoned, organized the physical evidence they found, went back to the guild to give another explanation, returned to where they fought Nargava... It was a tiring and stressful week.

"I'm beyond exhausted," Nick complained.

"I can't go on. This might be where I die...", Tiana said.

"Urgh, I'm starving...", Karan grumbled.

The Survivors were sprawled out on the sofas and floor of Anemone Alehouse. One might have thought they were passed out or dead.

"On your feet, everyone. Can't have you dying on me. We're getting started," Redd said, clapping their hands. The waiters began setting dish after dish of food on the tables.

"Ooh, this looks delicious. The food is well-arranged, too," Nick

remarked.

"Yeah, the presentation is beautiful. This girl deserves all the credit for that," Redd said, motioning to one of the transgender waiters, who smiled proudly. "She was a tattoo artist before coming to this bar. She's good at drawing, though not as skilled as Bond."

"Don't compare yourself to Bond. He's practically cheating," Nick told the employee. Bond could draw with such detail because of his ability to store visual data in his head. The employee didn't know that and seemed to think of him as a rival.

"Out of the way, please," Redd said, shooing Nick aside so they could help prepare the food.

The main table featured fish mousse placed into glasses, cocktail salad made with labyrinth vegetables, herb-fried eight-horned boar meat, fried oysters, simmered sea bream head with angel mushrooms, and paella with mochi wheat. The food had a slightly more luxurious feel than usual.

"Give a toast, Nick," Redd urged.

"All right. Does everyone have a glass?" Nick asked, looking around.

The rest of the Survivors had all managed to scramble to their feet and grab drinks. Ada and Reina, who were regulars at the bar at this point, were present, too, and they were having fun talking to Redd and the waiters. There was one other important guest at the bar.

"Man, you can never have enough free alcohol," Olivia giggled as a waiter poured her a drink.

"Hey," Nick said.

"Yeah?" Olivia responded.

"Where have you been for the last week? You vanished on us. Do you have any idea how hard we've been working?"

Olivia had disappeared soon after they'd rescued the abducted children. She didn't show up once while the Survivors were running around trying to wrap up the Steppingman case.

"I was working really hard, too, I'll have you know! I was meeting with old acquaintances of mine to make sure you weren't suspected or arrested!"

"Really?"

"Well, I ended up telling people that I defeated White Mask while you all assisted me, but... I couldn't exactly tell people about Bond, could I?" Olivia said, giggling like an innocent girl. She received five frigid glares in response.

"I appreciate you keeping mum on that, but we haven't told anyone about your identity, either," Nick responded.

"All right, all right. I still have a lot I haven't told you. I'll take the time to fill you in later," Olivia said, with no sign of a guilty

conscience. Nick sighed with open annoyance.

“Oh, what a pain... It doesn't matter. You don't need to explain yourself. I don't wanna hear it,” he said.

“H-hey! Surely you don't mean that!” Olivia protested.

“We can have a serious talk later. Right now, it's time to celebrate. A lot has happened, but...” Nick trailed off.

To say “a lot had happened” was an understatement. Nick thought of the incidents at the Garbage Heap, the kidnapped children, the girl who died, and Nargava, who treated patients even as he spread disease. For a moment, he thought it might be insensitive to hold a banquet like this.

“A lot has happened, and that's exactly why you need to let loose. There's nothing wrong with that,” Ada finished, sensing the reason for his hesitation. She watched as Olivia cackled, who was already a few drinks in.

“Geez, someone's already started. Cheers. You all can spend the night however you want. Dig in!” Nick said perfunctorily, and everyone raised their glasses. They were all more than ready to begin.

“Man, I'm getting a headache just thinking about everything I have to do,” Nick said.

“Hey, don't sweat the small stuff. Adventurers are supposed to live carefree lives,” Ada teased. Nick shook his head in annoyance.

“Not all adventurers are like that. Right, Karan?” he said.

“Yeah. It's useful to have someone who constantly nags the party about small details the rest of us would rather not think about,” Karan responded happily after Nick called her over.

“Damn straight,” Nick said.

“I'm impressed you can be proud of that. Well, I get what you're trying to say,” Ada said in disbelief, and Nick laughed.

“Anyway, Nick. These oysters are amazing,” Karan remarked.

“Oooh, lemme try.”

Karan gave him an oyster small enough to be eaten in one bite. Nick had grown used to seafood as a child because he'd traveled a lot with his parents.

“Oh, it's spicy,” Karan warned.

“Nnn...? Nnn?!” Nick screamed with his mouth shut. The oyster seemed mellow and creamy at first, but the spiciness that followed set his mouth on fire. He felt like he was going to break out sweating. “Do you have a drink?”

“Yep,” Karan responded, handing him one almost as soon as he asked. It was white wine. It tasted refreshing as it went down his throat.

“Man, these are delicious. I wish I could eat amazing food like this every day,” Nick said.

Oysters were relatively expensive. Their delicate nature meant they had to be kept frozen by mages during transport, making them cost more to ship than resilient animals with a stronger taste.

"The oyster wasn't that expensive. There was a good haul," Karan responded.

"Huh... That's good timing with the festival coming up," Nick said.

"What festival?" Karan asked, confused.

"Oh yeah, it hasn't been a whole year yet since you came. That goes for all of you, actually. Monsters are less active in the summer. It's called estivation."

"Yeah, I know that."

"That makes it the perfect time for a festival. People shoot off fireworks near the Goody Waterworks and open shops throughout the city. It's fun."

"I wanna go!"

"You should. We're gonna have to take a break from our adventurer work because of the decreased monster activity anyway..."

Nick used to dread the summer because his party would always go broke from the lack of jobs, but this year was different. His pockets were full because of the big job they'd just finished. It was the perfect season to have some fun.

"Aren't you forgetting about some work you have to do before then?" Redd asked.

"Uh, well..." Nick said.

"Leon's trial is approaching. They're going to give an estimate for the amount of reparations he owes soon, and we need to make sure he's squeezed for all he's worth."

"Th-that sounds dramatic..."

"His victims won't get their money if we don't. That applies to the casino and the passersby he injured, too. That's why we're going to sell his secret magic item and art collection and put them toward the reparations. Well, we'll figure that part out after the trial."

"Just how big is his collection?"

Redd's mouth twisted into a grin. "Leon is a truly skilled excavator. It's a collection that'll make anyone's mouth water."

"Really...?" Nick found that more than a little ironic.

"Fortunately, he's agreed to sell it. He's even suggested we hold an auction in conjunction with the festival."

"If he had just led an honest life, he could've been renowned as an adventurer or a merchant..."

"It's part of my job to set people like him back onto a decent path. But that'll come after I get him to pay what he owes," Redd said with a smile. It wasn't their usual alluring smile, but one that conveyed

their passion for their work. There weren't many people who were at once so charismatic and skilled at their job. Nick was beginning to understand why people got attached to this bar.

"Good luck. I need to see Leon again soon. I'll bring him a gift," Nick said.

"Oh, do you have business with him?"

"I still need his help with a few things."

"Hmm... This has nothing to do with the trial, right?"

"I don't think so. I'll explain later."

"Then that's fine. That's enough work talk. Oooh, they're getting riled about something."

Nick looked where Redd was pointing and saw Tiana and Bond playing cards with some employees they had ensnared. They must have had a great hand because they were dragging all the chips on the table toward themselves. The employees across from them took large swigs of alcohol, both looking like they were in a foul mood.

"I'm gonna win next!" one of the employees declared.

"You're not cheating, are you?" the other asked.

"Of course not! This is pure skill!" Tiana responded.

"Hmm-hmm, just so. You cannot pull off a move like that without impressive intellect," Bond said.

Nick scowled and walked toward Tiana and Bond.

"What do you think you're doing? This is a party," he asked.

"They're the ones who challenged me! It's not like I set out to swindle some amateurs!" Tiana protested, shaking her head. Nick could tell she was up to something, though. He glared at Bond, who was sitting next to her.

"I'm, uh... Just memorizing the cards that have appeared and informing Tiana of her probability of winning!" Bond explained, looking nervous. Exasperated, Nick picked Bond up out of his chair. "Wh-what is the meaning of this?!"

"Don't count cards against amateurs. It's not fair. Just play normally," Nick chastised.

"We are not betting money! We are only playing to determine who has to take a drink, so it does not violate my code of ethics! I want to enjoy this kind of fun once in a while!" Bond insisted.

"Yeah, we're all just having fun here," Tiana said.

Nick looked around and saw that it looked like everyone was having a merry time, just as Tiana said. Nick wasn't great in this kind of setting, but he thought he might have let some pent-up frustration get the better of him, and let it go with a sigh.

"Nick, it's too early to slip away for some late-night fun," Zem said, seeming to sense his listlessness.

"I'm not gonna do that!" Nick yelled back.

“Are you sure? I’d be happy to assist you if there is a girl you would like to take with you...”

“Nope, I’m good. Just focus on enjoying yourself.”

“I will do just that. It’ll be right back to work when I wake up in the morning, after all.”

“Work? Do you have a part-time job or something?”

Nick didn’t have any work in mind for the Survivors, so he didn’t know what Zem meant.

“There has been some disorder in the Garbage Heap since Nargava’s passing. I think I will look after the patients he was in the middle of treating.”

“That doesn’t sound fun... Are you gonna be okay alone?”

“I am planning to send them to a nearby sanctuary before long. There is actually a priest who was supposed to be permanently stationed in the Garbage Heap, but they were scared of the place and were more than happy to push their work onto Nargava.”

Zem realized that something was off after taking multiple trips into the Garbage Heap. There should have been a priest assigned to the area to perform Sacred Fire, but they didn’t seem to have a problem with Nargava’s presence. Sacred Fire was a specialized skill that only certain priests were capable of performing. Any priest who could perform the rite was able to enter and leave the Garbage Heap at will. Despite that, Nargava secured his own room within the area and treated patients. Based on what Nargava had said, it would be no exaggeration to say he was invading another priest’s turf. Zem guessed that the only reason it didn’t become an issue was because the sanctuary was slacking on all duties other than Sacred Fire.

“Well, don’t push yourself too hard,” Nick said with a nasty grin.

“Understood,” Zem responded, nodding.

A drunk waiter bumped into Reina, who was helping set the tables.

“Ah!” she gasped.

She was knocked toward Zem, of all people, who instinctively caught her, re-creating the scene from a couple weeks prior.

“Oh, s-sorry! I’ll move!” Reina panicked, going pale. She scrambled to get away but ended up tripping and falling onto him again. Nick watched the situation anxiously.

“Don’t worry, Reina. Are you okay?” Zem asked, remaining surprisingly calm. He even helped her up. The waiter who bumped into Reina apologized, but Zem said that was not necessary and poured them both drinks.

“Th-thank you...,” Reina said, stepping back.

“No need to thank me,” Zem responded.

“Um... N-not just for that, but for saving my friends, too.”

“Did you see them?”

“Yes! They weren’t doing so well, though...”

The missing friends Reina had been searching for were among the children the Survivors saved. The children were all healthy as could be, aside from the deceased girl named Martha. They hadn’t been infected with yellow demon fever or made to take any dubious drugs. According to the other children, Martha was good at stealing and put her skill to use one day to steal something that Nargava was closely guarding. It turned out to be a piece of gauze that he had used on a patient with yellow demon fever. Nargava grew furious and took her away somewhere when he learned that she had touched it.

The children’s stories made apparent another strange contradiction about Nargava—he staunchly avoided experimenting on the children he abducted. He tried as hard as he could to save Martha after she was accidentally infected, and he took strict measures to ensure the other children wouldn’t meet the same fate. He also thoroughly disinfected the house he trapped the children within, pestered them constantly to clean, and gave them toys and candy as rewards if they did. If the house was not sufficiently clean, he would teach them how to do better. The children didn’t begrudge Nargava for kidnapping them. Most of them actually grieved his death.

In the end, no one had any idea what Nargava was thinking, which was part of the reason the Survivors had to work so hard to find evidence. For filing purposes, the Adventurers Guild concluded that he was just “taking care of the children until he began his cruel human experimentation” and that it was no different from “a jeweler protecting his jewels, leaving no room for extenuating circumstances to absolve him of any guilt.” Nick and Zem thought he simply couldn’t cross that line or just didn’t want to.

“But I’m glad they’re safe. It’s all thanks to you, Zem, and everyone, too. I wanted to thank you for that...,” Reina continued.

“I am glad to hear it. Please don’t go on any more reckless adventures,” Zem warned.

“I’m sorry for what happened at Goopy Waterworks, too. You’ve saved me so many times. I’ll pay you back when I grow up!”

“I appreciate it.”

Zem smiled kindly, and Reina bowed and left. Noise filled the bar once more when everyone saw that trouble had been avoided.

“Are you fine around little girls now?” Nick asked, but Zem shook his head.

“I’m afraid not. I felt a small urge to puke as she fell into my arms. I was doing my best to endure it,” he said.

“Geez, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It was not as bad as before.”

“That’s good, at least.”

“When we got those children to open the door, I felt like I was able to forgive my pathetic shortcomings,” Zem muttered. “Saving the children was not the first thing on my mind as I yelled in front of the door. I saw it only as an opportunity to bury my past. I am hardly as laudable as I seem.”

“I think anyone could relate to that. Everyone is haunted by something from their past. The experience you had is what enables you to be kind to the underprivileged and those suffering. You can’t just ignore people in need. I don’t have it in me to care for total strangers like that,” Nick responded.

“What am I to make of that coming from you?” Zem asked teasingly.

“Shut up,” Nick snapped.

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist. Shall we enjoy the feast?” Zem replied before joining a group of Anemone Alehouse employees.

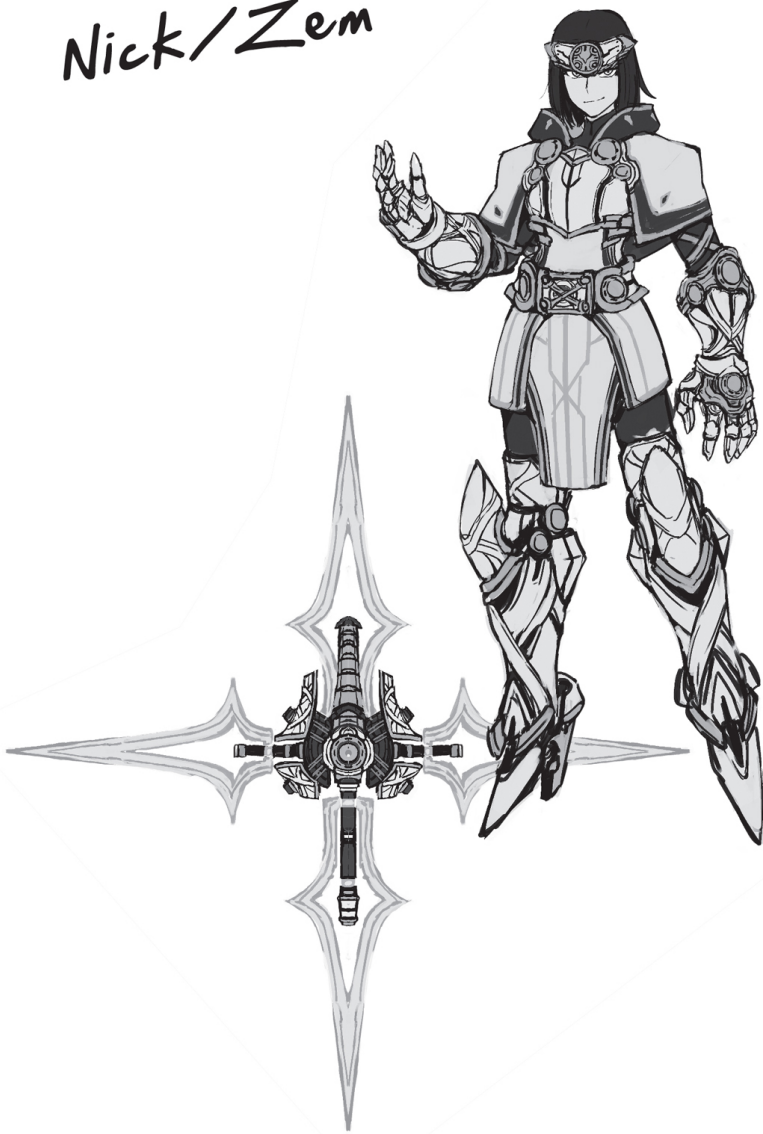
The name “Southern Saint” resurfaced in Nick’s mind as he watched Zem from behind. He thought that rather than a villain who spread conspiracy and killed others, the title was more fit for a person like him.

Nick followed Zem’s example and enjoyed the feast. He found Karan again for food recommendations to satisfy his appetite, shoved some dessert into Bond’s mouth to get him to stop making such a racket, and finally let himself relax.

As the night grew late, the feeling that the job was truly done sank in for each of the Survivors.



Nick/Zem



A MONTHLY MAGAZINE UNCOVERING THE SECRETS AND LEGENDS OF LABYRINTH CITY

Lemuria

King's Calendar 439
SUMMER ISSUE #1

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PROMOTION

Gourmet guide for the
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SPECIAL FEATURE

An Urban Legend Come to Life! Who Is the Steppingman?!



An Urban Legend Come to Life! Who Is the Steppingman?!

Mysteries surround us every day in Teran, the Labyrinth City.

One night while walking home, F (12 years old) was suddenly dragged into the darkness and restrained. She resisted with all her might and tried to get a look at her assailant, but...*there was nobody there*. Technically, she could see her assailant, but she couldn't make out their form. It was then that she remembered rumors of a mysterious figure known as the Steppingman. F trembled with fear, knowing that she was powerless to protect herself against a fearsome monster out of a fairy tale.

Just as F was about to give up hope that she would ever return home, a new person arrived at the scene! They attacked the assailant with lightning speed and saved her. Before she knew it, the mysterious villain had disappeared, leaving F alone in the back alley with her savior. Moonlight illuminated the person to reveal a beautiful woman smiling down at her. According to F, the woman had long hair and was wearing a rustic coat, and she bowed before jumping away into the night like a quick grasshopper.

This reporter spoke to a trustworthy source, who is well-informed about the rampant black-market activity in Labyrinth City, and learned that an orb capable of hiding one's form was put up for sale. Based on this information, it is possible that the true identity of the Steppingman is a fearsome martial artist using a mysterious orb. One must also wonder if the beautiful woman who saved the girl from the strange assailant in the nick of time is the rumored paladin.

This reporter will act on F's testimony and continue to pursue the mysterious criminal lurking in Labyrinth City.

Written by Olivia Taylor

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